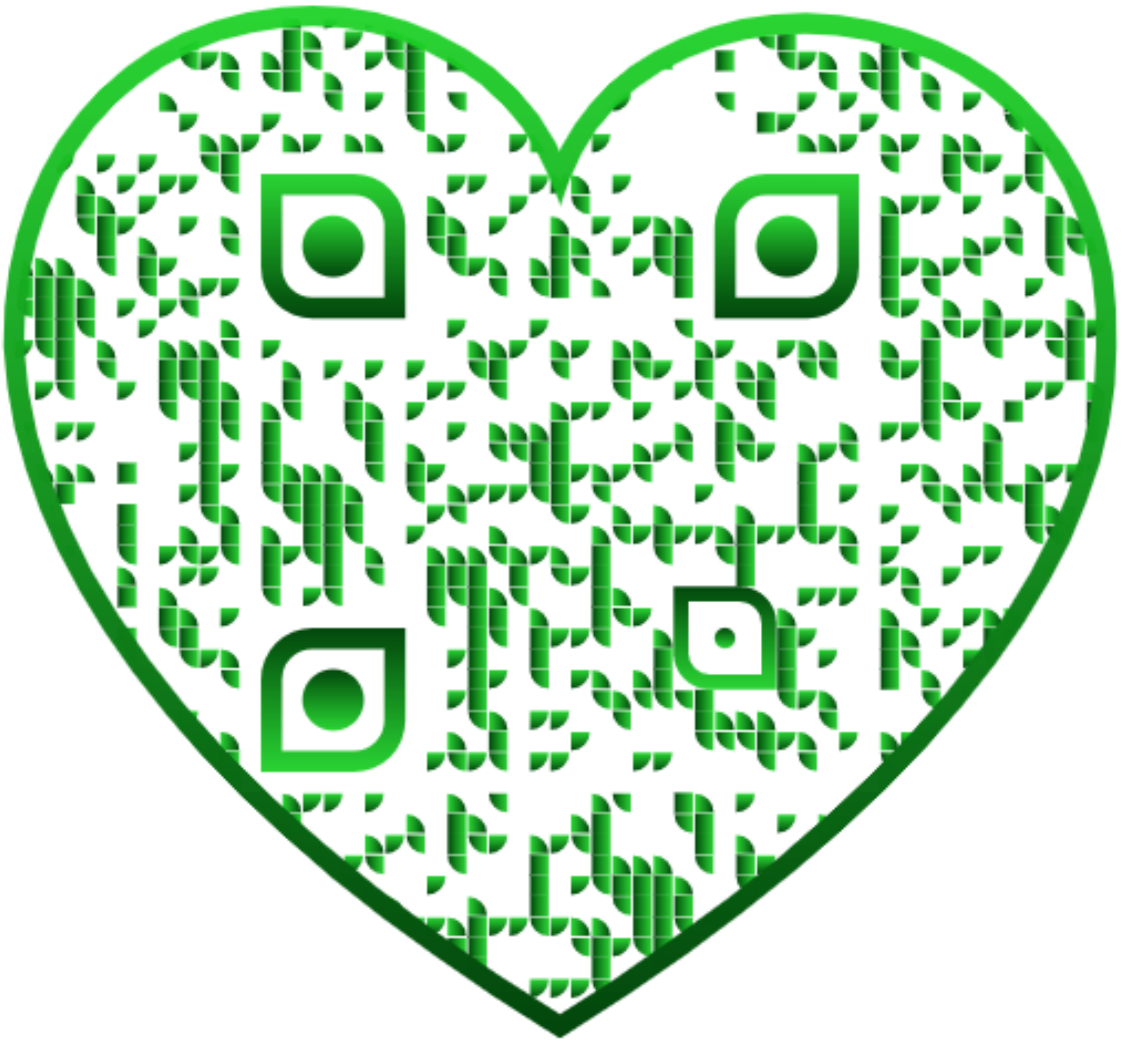
Matt Tomlinson

Speaking with the Dead

An Ethnography of Extrahuman Experience



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Preface

Because much of this book deals with spoken words, a few notes on the recording and transcribing process may be useful. I did a lot of audio recording during the research project, all of it with the permission of the Canberra Spiritualist Association and the mediums working at their services. My equipment was a small and inexpensive Sony mp3 recorder with an external microphone. Recording conditions were sometimes difficult, with (for example) a heater blowing, a coffee urn boiling, and the room itself providing plenty of echo. Readers will note several instances in which inaudible speech is mentioned, and what "inaudible" sometimes means in these cases is "not recorded clearly enough."

I have gone over transcripts of all of the recordings multiple times to make corrections and verify accuracy. In the service of readability, I have edited text lightly to heal the bumps and bruises of real-time talk. Ellipses indicate snippets of deleted text. I do not mark every deletion with ellipses; for example, sometimes I eliminate minor repetitions, placeholders ("um"), false starts, and the like without indicating them. Em dashes (—) indicate interruption, either by oneself or another speaker. As an example of the smoothing-out process, "But he's also showing me gum trees," quoted in Chapter 1, was originally spoken as "But sh — the— he's, he's also showing me gum trees."

I generally use real names for mediums and pseudonyms for audience members. One person whose real name I use is given a pseudonym in discussing a sensitive event. Priscilla, Benedetta, and Ariadne (first mentioned in Chapter 2), Warren, Aunt Stephanie, and Stella (Chapter 3), Maura (Chapter 4), Jessica, Wanda, Anne, and Jack (Chapter 5), and Susan (Chapter 8) are all pseudonyms.

CHAPTER 1

The Opposite of Haunting

Within any spiritual or religious tradition, nothing could seem more obvious than the reality of the unseen world. Gods demand attention. Spirits compel action. In a famous essay on religion's cultural foundations, Clifford Geertz (1973, 118) wryly observed that when he asked a Balinese man who had gone into trance and performed as the goddess Rangda if the man believed Rangda were real, the question left Geertz "open to the suspicion of idiocy" — What do you mean, is Rangda real? I *was* her. But outsiders often view these practices negatively: Who could believe such things? Don't you know you're talking to air? There is an imbalance of certainties, then, in which spiritual claims inspire either devotion or scorn.

Many social scientists who study religious life try to avoid these extremes. A careful observer can try to understand the social reality of spirits without insisting on any reality beyond that. Social reality can be a slippery concept even for social scientists, though, and the balance between skepticism and advocacy has proven difficult to sustain for many authors.

In this book, I try to maintain the balance. As part of my ongoing research on popular religion, I developed an interest in the religion known as Spiritualism. In Spiritualism, you speak with dead people. In its heyday from the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth, Spiritualist séances and pub-

lic demonstrations attracted huge crowds and attention. It had deep but often unacknowledged influence in politics, with Alfred Deakin in Australia and William Lyon Mackenzie King in Canada acting on Spiritualist principles. Although some scientists attempted to investigate the movement's claims soberly, many commentators couldn't help tilting in one direction or the other. Harry Houdini, the magician and escape artist, wrote *A Magician Among the Spirits* in 1924 to denounce Spiritualist mediums as "vultures," adding that he did not mean to insult actual vultures, which are a blameless natural species. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes and dear friend of Houdini, toured Australia as an evangelist for Spiritualism and announced in his two-volume history of the movement that Spiritualism was the greatest event in history since the coming of Christ (Houdini 1924, 217, and Doyle 1926, vii).

In deciding to conduct research with Spiritualists, I intended, as far as possible, to hold the difficult balance: to be open-minded, to learn what they had to teach, and to try to understand how Spiritualism works culturally — that is, how people create it together. The reader can judge whether I have kept the balance or not. I must mention that the Spiritualists of Canberra, Australia, were an exceptionally welcoming group. They seemed happy to have an outsider join them. This was a chance for them to teach me what they knew to be solid facts. And, as a small and aging congregation, they were glad to have someone in his forties help run some of the practical aspects of services, like setting up the computer and speakers before the service.

I joined the Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA) in 2015. Becoming a member simply meant paying twenty dollars, signing my name to an application form, and waiting for the committee to approve. I attended often enough that, in addition to being accepted as a member, I was asked to join the church committee and duly elected to it in August 2016. I also took the night courses the CSA offered on mediumship, psychic skills, tarot, and dream interpretation. In January 2019, I moved to Norway and served out my committee term from a distance. I continued

to correspond and consult with Association members as I wrote up the findings of my research.

This book is the result. It is a portrait of a modern religion with an old purpose: to communicate with the dead. I have tried to speak with spirits. I have witnessed many mediums try as well, and they do a better job of it than me. Most of this book will describe what I learned from skilled mediums and what it feels like to try mediumship as a newcomer. I will discuss moments from services, private readings, and other events, telling the stories of how mediums find their way into a world where talking with people on the astral plane is sometimes routine but never dull.

Like any religious movement, Spiritualism is a historical creature. It has changed in profound ways since it began. Although many present-day Spiritualists describe their religion as primeval, it took institutional shape in the mid-nineteenth century. Its early popularity was stoked by physical manifestations such as mysterious knocks, writing by unseen hands, musical instruments floating about the room, and, to the delight of historians of photography, images of ghosts and ectoplasm (spirit substance oozing from mediums' bodies). When spirits were contacted in the early days of the movement, they might be family members, but they were just as likely to be famous figures. Benjamin Franklin showed up notably often at early séances. Since those days, however, Anglophone Spiritualism has deemphasized physical manifestations. Mediums today are likely to be "mental mediums." They receive impressions which they believe come from the spirit world: sights, sounds, scents, tastes, feelings, and intuitions. Their task is to pass these signs on to living human audiences in order to figure out who this deceased person is and what they want to say. Mental mediums do not usually change their tone of voice as they converse between dead and living. For example, they do not sound creaky when speaking for grandparents or use tiny voices when speaking for children. They nonetheless bring forth a parade of characters when they do their work. These characters are your late

loved ones. Benjamin Franklin doesn't show up from the spirit world anymore. Your grandmother does.

It is tempting to view Spiritualism as one way people address the vulnerability of families. As extended families shrink to nuclear families, nuclear families fragment, and hometowns become a succession of worksites, it is plausible to see movements like Spiritualism as attempts at making kinship stable. The people you really love and care for, mediums say, will always be with you. You will always be with them. Family is eternal. This understanding of Spiritualism's appeal gains traction when we consider how older Christian visions of heaven and hell have lost plausibility for many people. Except for fundamentalists, who believes in eternal hellfire anymore? And if there is a heaven, isn't it less likely to feature harps and clouds and more likely to look like the version mediums describe, a loving family forever?

But Spiritualism is not just a way to make family ties feel secure. Much of the passion poured into mediumship comes from the modernist conviction that science is the source of truth. Modern Spiritualism took shape in the same era as Darwinian understandings of evolution. At the same time, developments in technology like telegraphy and photography prompted new thinking about the possibilities of communication and recording. As a result, Spiritualists came to cherish the idea that progress is woven into the design of the universe and the claim that life after death is *provable*. Scientific investigators like members of Britain's famed Society for Psychical Research worked to understand whether mediums' skills came from genuine otherworldly sources, or perhaps from telepathy, keen observational powers, or subconscious memory — or, for that matter, from mediums' fraudulence and audiences' gullibility (Blum 2007, and Crabtree 2015).

Although mediums and skeptical investigators often disagreed on what counted as evidence of real communication with the dead, many nineteenth- and twentieth-century mediums came to agree that they needed to prove their claims. Today, the kind of evidence most Spiritualist mediums produce is a har-

mony between their description of a person's character and a listener's memories of that person. If a medium describes your late grandmother's personality vividly, with supporting details that cluster like stars around the sense of a story, then, Spiritualists argue, the medium has shown you something true and deeply comforting about the nature of existence. There is no such thing as death. Your late loved ones are showing up here and now to speak with you.

The technologies that fired people's imaginations about spirit communication in the nineteenth century, especially photography, might seem to threaten Spiritualism these days. Photos and videos stored online now make accurate representations of dead people imperishable. Even the best mediums can't portray the dead as clearly as a photo or capture their voices as crisply as a recording. Mediumship is a notably complicated and chancy form of memory-work. But, I suggest, Spiritualist practices are likely to thrive with new technology because the connection Spiritualism makes between living and dead is not only about memory. Spiritualism emphasizes *recognition*. The point of a medium telling you about your deceased loved ones is not to look or sound like them, but to acknowledge them, and often to acknowledge them publicly, before an audience. In providing this opportunity for recognition, mediums underscore the fact that your loved ones mattered and your relationship with them mattered — and will always continue to matter.[1]

If I am correct in predicting that mediumship will continue to thrive in the twenty-first century and beyond, there is still no doubt that Spiritualist churches face the same challenges as other religious institutions. Just as the majority of Christians

1 In writing about recognition, I am drawing especially on Keane (1997). I am also inspired by Barbara Myerhoff's discussion of the "fierce human drive to be *noticed*," which she makes in reference to Jewish seniors in Los Angeles and resonates with my experiences with Spiritualist mediums. What Myerhoff says about elderly Jewish people's self-understandings applies well to mediums' work of expressive relationship-building: "the opposite of honor is not shame, but invisibility" (Myerhoff 1978, 183; emphasis in original).

prefer to skip church on Sunday, so the majority of Spiritualists — or, to broaden the category, people who are interested in hearing from the dead — do not want to sit through a formal service. They will watch celebrity mediums on TV, from Theresa Caputo to Tyler Henry to John Edward. They will attend psychic fairs, and occasionally pay a medium for a private, individual reading. Attending regular meetings is less appealing for many.

But women have kept Spiritualism alive. Indeed, Spiritualism's growth and development has always been profoundly shaped by female leaders. The movement began with knocking sounds heard in the presence of two sisters, Kate and Maggie Fox, in upstate New York in 1848. Many of the popular and influential mediums in Spiritualism's heyday were women. It gained strength in its resonance with nineteenth-century women's rights movements. And, as I show in the following pages, twice as many women as men attend Canberra Spiritualist Association meetings. This is emphatically not to say that men do not participate — and Spiritualist women sometimes say they wish more men would join. But this is a movement where women not only participate, but regularly speak with public authority.[2]

As practiced in Spiritualism, mediumship is distinctly modern in its empowerment of women and emphasis on the need for evidence to support its claims. For these reasons and others, I resist using the term "haunting" in these pages, although it might seem to fit a religion in which you speak with spirits. There is now a tendency in nonfiction writing to use the term "haunting" to analyze many kinds of loss, damage, and domination. But to approach Spiritualism in these terms, I suggest, would skew the possibilities of understanding it. Spiritualists made it clear to me that what they were doing was normal and unremarkable, so I am searching for suitable language to represent this. To put it plainly, in Spiritualism, the dead are not coming to haunt you but to help you. They are still alive, making

2 Key sources on Spiritualist feminism include Moore (1977, chapter 4), Braude (1989), and Owen (1989). For histories of the movement's heyday, see Podmore (1902), Brandon (1983), and McGarry (2008).

continual spiritual progress, gesturing toward a vitalist cosmos in which there is no end to existence and intimate connection is absolute.

* * *

I have to mention that my first encounter with Spiritualism was deeply upsetting. While living in Melbourne in the late 2000s, I had signed up for a mail-order course to learn more about Spiritualism because I was fascinated by the idea that people would go to church on Sundays to hear not from ministers but from the dead. As part of the course, there was one meeting held at the Victorian Spiritualists' Union's stately old hall in central Melbourne.

That day, I traipsed over to A'Beckett Street to hear about this curious religion. I do not remember much about the session except for one moment.

There were several speakers. One was a woman who told us how her young daughter — a toddler — had died of cancer. And, the woman said, this was wonderful. It showed that her daughter loved her and had gone ahead into the spirit world to guide her mother from there.

I was aghast. I had a young son, and the idea of celebrating a child's death was revolting. I tried hard not to be judgmental. I knew intellectually, if not emotionally, that the woman must have felt pain at one time, and maybe did still. But I couldn't put on critical armor. I sat there, dumbstruck, thinking: This is wrong. Then I left. When the completion certificate for the mail-order course arrived, I ripped it up and threw it away. I figured I had heard enough that day on A'Beckett Street.

Several years later, having moved to Canberra, I began to wonder if Spiritualism deserved a second look. I was not sure why I felt this way. My father had died a few years earlier, which might seem to be one reason; yet while I missed him, I was not expecting or wanting to hear from him. At his memorial service in Newton, New Jersey, while I was speaking, I looked out into the audience and saw him sitting there — and even in that

moment, I felt my mind was probably playing tricks on me. The next instant, he was gone. I was miserable that day, but I did not feel I needed to connect with him in any way except through memory.

I knew that part of my interest was practical. I wanted to have a research project close to home so I would not need to spend a lot of time away from my family. I had been conducting research in the Pacific, especially Fiji, which I loved. But by the time I moved to Canberra, my wife and I had two young sons, they were growing up quickly, and it was difficult to take them on trips to the islands. Of course, I was still repulsed by the idea of listening to rhapsodies about children's deaths. But I wondered if my first experience had been anomalous. Maybe even hard-core Spiritualists would have felt uncomfortable with the lesson on A'Beckett Street years before.

Another reason was intellectual. I realized that members of the public who know anything about Spiritualism tend to see it as a strange bird, flapping its wings vainly in modern storms. Spiritualists themselves cheerfully acknowledge that their views meet with public skepticism. Yet the attempt to communicate with spirits has an extensive human history, and central themes of Spiritualism, including the importance of your family in the afterlife and the ideal of human perfectibility, are endorsed by many people who would reject the idea that they are closet Spiritualists. I wanted to understand more about this imbalance in which many of a group's values are respected but the group's existence is largely unknown and, for those who do know about it, sometimes ridiculed.

In addition, having worked in the Fijian language during my earlier research, I had become painfully aware that a lack of deep fluency limits one's analysis. During my research I enjoyed speaking Fijian every day and was confident in my functional competence. But I was also aware of how much I was missing: individual voices, inside jokes, the salt in the soup of language. I wanted to try an English-language project in which I could analyze how people talk with each other about spiritual things, knowing that even if I got confused by people's philosophy or

logic, I would understand the nuances of how they expressed themselves.

So I began attending services at the Canberra Spiritualist Association. As I mentioned above, I was warmly welcomed. I let people know I was interested in what they had to say, and that I had a research project in mind, too. I began to learn how mediumship works. When the research project was officially funded and approved by university ethics boards as well as the CSA, I made audio recordings of services with mediums' permission.

One of the first things I noticed was that Spiritualist mediumship stands in a middle zone of people's understandings about how easy or difficult it is to communicate with spirits. In shamanism, as classically described by Mircea Eliade (1964), a young person typically has to become sick to gain healing powers. Being able to contact the spirit world starts with a painful apprenticeship. In comparison, I learned during my research in rural Kadavu Island, Fiji, that spirits are easy to reach. Most people in Kadavu are members of the Methodist Church. They enjoy drinking the mildly numbing beverage kava for hours every day. (I enjoy kava, too.) But the Methodists of Kadavu, influenced by evangelicals, worried that kava — the traditional drink of their ancestors — might be a conduit to those ancestors. And those ancestors might be up to no good, spiritually speaking. One Methodist minister told me he often said a prayer at kava-drinking sessions to guard against this connection between drinkers and spirits. In other words, making contact with spirits is too easy: You only need to take a sip.

In short, shamans work hard to get the gift of spirit communication. For Fijian Methodists, communicating with spirits is easy, but you shouldn't do it. Spiritualists fall between these extremes. They believe that anyone can communicate with the dead, and the dead are eager to take part in conversations. But becoming a good medium requires diligent practice. Some people may have more natural ability than others, but no one becomes a top medium on talent alone. You have to practice hard, make plenty of mistakes, and keep developing.

* * *

Mediumship does not require enchanted surroundings. It enchants the place it's in, even if this place is a large, echoey multipurpose room in a bland community-center complex. In this case, the suburb is Pearce, where the Canberra Spiritualist Association holds its meetings on the first, third, and fifth Sundays of each month, with a summer break from mid-December until mid-January. The room is large but unremarkable. Its wooden floors are mostly covered by hard black-rubber matting sealed to the floor with duct tape. Stackable black plastic chairs stand on gray metal legs. The walls are white, and long white vertical blinds shield large windows. The back of the room has a curtained stage which is used for storage. A visitor, looking at the architecture and decor, might expect anything from a dance class to a school assembly.[3]

A few members show up an hour before the service and arrange the chairs in an arc focused on the front and center of the room. A microphone is placed behind a card table holding a creaky laptop computer and video projector. Cables sprout from the table's equipment, with two lines running to speakers mounted on portable stands at either side of the room.

Despite the room's plain functionality, there are clues that something out of the ordinary is going on here. On a table near the door stand three framed images. One, an old photograph, shows what looks like rumpled cloth with a man's face peering from within it. The other two are reproductions of book covers, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The History of Spiritualism* and

3 Many Australians see the city of Canberra itself as decidedly unmagical, cold and boring with roads that only go in circles — the place where your tax dollars go to die. Peter Proudfoot (1994) offers a different view, arguing that Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion designed Canberra according to spiritual principles of sacred landscapes, making it a site akin to Stonehenge, Glastonbury, the Egyptian pyramids, and other geomantic hot spots. Laurie Duggan (2001, 170) argues that Proudfoot overstates the case due to his reliance on later accounts by the Griffins, but acknowledges that Walter "may have imbibed" principles from Spiritualism's cousins Anthroposophy and Theosophy at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

Estelle Roberts's *Fifty Years a Medium* without its cover text, just a picture of the stately Roberts with ethereal faces shimmering about her. At the far front of the room is another table, a low one draped in purple cloth overlain with white cloth. It has a vase of artificial flowers and a jug and water glasses on it, suggesting something modestly ceremonial.

Now comes the surest sign that something unusual is taking place. The service is underway, and a tall, broad-shouldered woman, standing at the front of the room and addressing an audience of sixteen people, is saying she "just heard a church bell ringing," although the room is silent. She goes on to explain:

> And this person is coming through to me with bell ringing. [Whispers:] It's so beautiful. [Normal voice:] But he's also showing me gum trees. So this is someone in Australia who also appreciated bell ringing. Yes, it's definitely in Australia. And I'm being… shown cauliflower. Cauliflower, 'kay, we'll go with cauliflower. And I'm being shown a goat. Anyway… a goat. I've got this man who thoroughly enjoys the bell ringers, who had a penchant for cauliflower with white sauce and a sprinkling of cheese, and there's also a goat connection with him, be it either he had goats or he knew someone who had goats, or something like that. But there's a goat connected with this man. Does anybody resonate with this man?

The popular image of mediums is that they are on fishing expeditions. Standing before an audience, a medium will supposedly say things like, "I see the letter M," and an overwrought person in the front row will cry, "It's Grandma Mary!" As the excerpt above shows, however, talented Spiritualist mediums work in a more unpredictable way than this. They offer clues to a mystery that can sometimes sound like it was written by a surrealist author. These are odd and remarkably specific details: The deceased man was an Australian who enjoyed church bells, cauliflower with cheese, and had some kind of "goat connection." The combination of church, cheese, and goats is so specific it's

funny, and the medium slyly suggests she herself is surprised by the impressions she's receiving.[4]

And then, when she asks, "Does anybody resonate with this man?," a woman in the audience immediately answers, "Yeah."

"You do," the medium responds. "Oh, good. I'm not batty."

Here is the moment where it is all too easy to tip the interpretive boat. On one side, the medium might be accused of "cold reading" (watching people's reactions to figure out what to say next) or "hot reading" (looking up audience members' details before the reading); or the audience member might be suspected of wanting so desperately to hear from a loved one that she bends random details into patterned truths (goats? well, he spent time on a farm). On the other side, one might insist that the weirdness of the details proves that spiritual communication is really taking place. If you *wanted* to trick someone into thinking you were speaking with a spirit, why would you mention cauliflower with white sauce and cheese, never mind the goats? Better to stick with the letter "M" and see where it takes you.

Here, then, is where I want to proceed with the most caution, moving ahead without capsizing. The conversation that actually developed that day between the medium and her living respondent, needless to say, was not like a conversation you would overhear in a supermarket line. Yet there was no hint of haunting or damp ghostliness, despite the fact that the third party in the conversation was dead. It was just a friendly question-and-answer session, with details offered, accepted, or rejected as a portrait came into view. The man was a pipe smoker? ("Yeah, absolutely.") He was impatient? (The audience member did not respond clearly.) Well, he insisted on punctuality. ("Yes.") He liked going outside for fresh air? ("Absolutely.") He knew how to play the gum leaf as a musical instrument, a rare Australian skill? ("No, no.") Less than nine minutes after she heard church bells, the medium finishes her reading for the woman in the audience, both of them having agreed that the man was the woman's father. The medium then moves on to her

4 These quotations come from a service held in May 2017.

next spiritual dialogue: "Okay, I've got a man with me at the moment who used to walk his dogs. And I feel these dogs were quite big. Got big dogs. Big — two dogs."

If we insist on proving or disproving the existential claims that frame these encounters, we would need to silence questions about mediums' intentions and self-understandings and the conversation's therapeutic charge. An investigator with an axe to grind will find something to hack apart soon enough. But, as I have mentioned, I am not posing questions of truth or falsehood in this book, although I do consider the topics of fraud and failure in Chapter 5. Rather, I am looking at the cultural dynamics of Spiritualist mediumship, especially the ways mediums and audiences learn to work together.

Of the many authors who have insisted on posing questions of ultimate truth, one of the most passionate was Alfred Russel Wallace, a pioneer of evolutionary science alongside Charles Darwin. Wallace took exception to David Hume's definition of "miracles" as violations of the laws of nature, arguing that miracles point to "superhuman intelligences" at work. Hume had concluded that "no human testimony [could]… prove a miracle," whereas Wallace insisted that Spiritualism was "an experimental science" doing exactly that (Hume 1955, 117–41, and Wallace 1875, 5, 118, 221). This book does not try to resolve the philosophical or scientific arguments, but shows instead how Spiritualists bring the arguments to life in such vivid ways: through church bells, cauliflower with cheese, and goats — or, on other occasions, a yellow daffodil, dirty sneakers, a lollipop, birds hitting propellers, a badly shaved beard, and a lemon tree.

The details might sound quirky, but I don't present them to make fun of anyone. Spiritualist mediums can be playful, but they take their philosophy of life after death seriously. In speaking with the dead, mediums continually attempt to link the intimate with the ultimate, doing what people have long done in societies around the world. The fact that mediums speak their evidence in New Age accents means their efforts now often meet with contempt. An appreciation of the hard facts of science and the supple philosophies of esoteric faiths leads Spiritualists to

insist on proof that takes deeply personal forms. A sympathetic analysis must be personal in return.

CHAPTER 2

Dreaming before an Audience

To learn mediumship, I signed up in 2017 for a twenty-week course conducted by Lynette and Norman Ivory, the leaders of the Canberra Spiritualist Association. Norman was the CSA's president and Lynette the treasurer, and they were the prime movers of everything the Association did. Neither was originally from Canberra; Norman was from England, Lynette from Sydney. They were well into their seventies, had devoted themselves to Spiritualism for decades, and had run the CSA for the past ten years. Norman always waited outside the meeting hall in Pearce before Sunday services, greeting arrivals in his cheerful British baritone, and Lynette waited for students in the tiny foyer of the seniors' center where evening classes were held.

The mediumship course was held on Thursday nights from 7:30 to 9:30 in the suburb of Turner. Our classroom was tucked away at the side of the building, and we usually had to skirt around a yoga session taking place in the main room to get to our place. Gray carpet, beige plastic chairs, and an underpowered heating system were our room's main features, meaning it did not feel much more enchanted than the community hall in Pearce where services took place.

On the first night of the course, April 6, 2017, there were five people in the room: Lynette, Norman, and three middle-

aged students: Vee, Priscilla, and myself. In later weeks we were joined by a fourth student, Debby from New Zealand.

A key lesson we learned that first night was that having confidence is essential to successful mediumship. This lesson would be repeated over the coming months. Lynette and Norman emphasized confidence so strongly that a portion of each class was devoted to public speaking — having students simply stand and talk. In that first session, we were told to stand at the front of the room and explain our interest in mediumship. After we sat down, we were given critical pointers about how to be better public speakers. I was told to slow down a bit, and not put my hands in my pockets or fold my arms when speaking.

You will receive odd impressions while practicing mediumship, Norman said, things that don't seem meaningful to you. But you should say what you sense. The symbol or message you get is meant for the person you're talking to. When you are confident, he said, you won't imagine things. You will receive real messages from the spirit world. Lynette emphasized the point, saying, "If you get a thought in your head, speak it," and "Don't question yourself. Just give what you get. It doesn't matter how stupid it seems." She followed this advice with a story. Once she was giving a reading and a male spirit was coming through, but the recipient had trouble recognizing who he was. Lynette then saw a yellow daffodil. What a random image! How could it mean anything? But she mentioned the daffodil, and immediately the recipient knew who this person was.

Part of having confidence, Lynette explained, was not letting listeners' negative responses discourage you: "Don't allow a 'no' to put you off," she told us. It was always possible that the problem lay with the audience member who could not recall who their deceased relatives were. She said that people's mobility was "a weakness of Spiritualism in Australia," meaning that everyone moves around so much that family connections have become weaker, which makes mediumship harder. How can you describe a person's deceased aunt to their satisfaction if they never met her?

Despite my fidgetiness during public speaking, I was never too nervous when I did it, because I routinely talk to audiences in my day job. But when it came time to take the next step and try mediumship, I was anxious. This was a different kind of work: speaking with the dead. And not just speaking with the dead, but speaking with the dead on behalf of someone else. I was not sure it was possible, or if it was, how to do it. But I knew I had to try.

My first attempt was not actually in the classroom. Around three weeks earlier, a British medium named Lynn Probert had visited Canberra and held two training workshops, which I will describe below. During those workshops, I made brief, if game, efforts — but those were sitting down in one-on-one sessions with fellow trainees. Tonight, in the back room of the Canberra Seniors Centre, was my first time trying to "bring through" a spirit while standing before an audience.

To begin your work as a medium, you do an "attunement," meaning you close your eyes, quiet your squirrel brain, and try to sense your own energy. The cultivated mindlessness of attunement gives way as impressions eventually pop into your body and mind. The key task for a medium is learning to recognize impressions that come from the spirit world, and then having the confidence to present those impressions to an audience.

Vee, an artist, was the first to try that night. Norman, sitting at the side of the room, prompted her with questions about what she was sensing. Lynette wrote Vee's answers on a small whiteboard mounted on the wall. First, Norman asked about the person's physical traits. Next, he asked where they were from. Then he asked about their manner of death. Finally, he asked if this person had a message to give. Answering these questions as Norman posed them, Vee described a young girl, eight or ten years old. She had brown hair and a round face. She was from the United Kingdom, maybe Ireland. And she had died falling down stairs. This description made sense to Priscilla, who believed it was her daughter's best friend's sister, a brown-

haired and round-faced girl who died at fifteen when she fell off a pickup truck.[1]

Priscilla went next. She was in touch with a spirit, too, and felt I was the intended recipient. Norman asked questions to develop the portrait. It was a childless woman. She had died in her sixties, after her husband had already passed away. Her name included a C and an L.

My Aunt Carole had died without children in her sixties, not long after her husband, so I was suitably impressed.

The only thing that didn't make sense to me was the message Priscilla related: I should be myself, and this woman was proud of me. Aunt Carole had had strong Christian beliefs which did not leave room for things like Spiritualism. In her later years she became a conservative Episcopalian, and I doubted she would approve of what I was doing now. But there was no question that Priscilla, like Vee, had given an impressive performance.

Now I stood up and faced the audience.

And here was the problem. I had an image in my head. It was a thin, dark-haired man with a mustache. He was wearing a suit and bowtie. So I described him, identifying him as someone known to Vee. But I knew exactly where he was coming from, and it wasn't the astral plane.

* * *

From its beginnings, Spiritualism made claims about otherworldly presence which were met by demands for worldly proof. To demonstrate the validity of their connections with the spirit world, mediums produced knocking sounds, made tables tilt and dance, went into trance to deliver lectures on topics listeners proposed, and wrote texts under "spirit impression." Later in the nineteenth century, they would begin producing ectoplasm, spirit turned into filmy or waxy matter.

1 The vehicle was identified as a ute, a low-slung Australian utility vehicle. I later asked Vee if when she said she "saw" the girl she had really seen the girl visually, and she said yes.

Mediums' interest in proving they were communicating with spirits was paralleled by scientists' interest in testing their claims. If mediums could enable spirits to move furniture, then the movements might be measured to establish cause and effect. If spirit could be made flesh, or at least ectoplasm, then it could be weighed and dissected. The British Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882, followed three years later by the American Society for Psychical Research.

Some laboratory scientists were unimpressed by what they found. The pioneering English physicist and chemist Michael Faraday made an ingenious device — pieces of wood rubber-banded together, with glass rollers in between — to measure the pressure from people's fingers as they rested their hands on the edge of a table. Even as they were seemingly unaware of what they were doing, the test subjects were pressing just hard enough to start the table tilting, as Faraday's device showed (Blum 2007, 20–21).

Some scientists were willing to be persuaded by mediums' claims, however. Alfred Russel Wallace knew that natural selection explains our biology. But, he wondered, what about our minds and our souls? He sat with mediums in London to see what he could learn. "Wallace saw nothing that approached the level of scientific proof" required to show a higher intelligence at work, the science journalist Deborah Blum (2007, 39) writes. "But the séances were just weird enough to be encouraging."

Eventually, Wallace was convinced. He and likeminded investigators like William Crookes and Oliver Lodge would go on to argue that Spiritualist claims had been empirically verified, although this position was dismissed and ridiculed by most of their peers. As I describe in Chapter 5, many physical mediums were caught in fraud in this era. Although exposure did not necessarily lead to a medium's loss of public reputation — and in some cases, observers protested that even though the medium was caught cheating this time, she didn't *always* cheat — the claim that mediumship's physical effects could be tested came to seem less tenable. If any kind of dialogue were to continue between Spiritualists and scientists, the search for evidence, and

agreement on what counted as evidence, would need to take a new path.

In contrast to the position that mediums' effects needed to be tested by scientific standards of replicability, William James reversed the figure-and-ground relationship. He argued that if someone claims that spiritual phenomena do not exist, you only need to find one contrary example to disprove their claim. Or, as he put it, "If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you must not seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white" (James 1912, 319). And James felt he had indeed found a white crow, a woman whose talents as a medium were so extraordinary that any objective observer would agree she had perceptions and insights which could not be explained by normal science.

Her name was Leonora Piper. She lived in Boston. She would go into a trance, feeling her brain go numb, the room grow chilly, and light disappear into blackness. When she spoke, she did not always give accurate information to her listeners, but she seemed to do so more often than other mediums. And when she succeeded, the level of detail could be astonishing. When the parents of a recently deceased young girl came for a sitting, Piper, speaking as the girl, gave both her name and nickname (Katherine, or "Kakie"), mentioned the nicknames of her brother ("Dodo") and sister ("Bagie") and real name of another sister (Eleanor), mentioned her love of horses, her desire to bite a silver medal her father had brought, and her old rag doll, Dinah. The details were all accurate and made sense to her parents. She also included details which the sitters found hard to understand or verify, but overall this was the kind of performance that impressed and convinced observers. As Piper continued to practice her mediumship — watched not only by James but studied intensively by Richard Hodgson — her reputation as an honest medium grew. She seemed to be the best chance Spiritualists had of proving their case. She didn't make tables tip, summon ghostly faces in darkened rooms, or produce

ectoplasm. She talked. And the talk, for many of her listeners, was proof of hidden reality.[2]

But what was the nature of that reality? What was being proven? Of those who took Piper seriously, some felt that her skills simply showed that telepathy was real. She was reading the minds of her subjects, telling them what they already knew, scanning their brains, and revoicing their thoughts. Others felt that her demonstrations went beyond telepathy and that some spirit agency must be involved. In either case, she seemed to be a white crow in an odd flock — or, to switch metaphors, "the only flower left in a denuded garden" of discredited mediums, as Blum puts it. Yet there were some awkward features of Piper's mediumship. Her spirit guides seemed artificial, like the French doctor who spoke through her but did not know French very well. And Piper herself admitted that she did not know what to think. "My opinion is today," she said in 1901, "as it was 18 years ago. Spirits may have controlled me and they may not. I confess that I do not know" (Blum 2007, 189, 255).[3]

* * *

On that night in the Canberra Seniors Centre in April 2017, I saw that thin, dark-haired man in his suit and bowtie, and knew I should describe his appearance to see if anyone in the room recognized him. But embarrassingly enough, I already recognized

2 The information in this paragraph comes from Blum (2007): Piper's description of trance (181), and snippets of the transcript of her reading (218; for the full transcript, see Hodgson 1898, 485–89). For an analytical critique of Piper's techniques and how a neat account of success can grow from complex verbal exchanges, see Brandon (1983, 206–13). In addition to speaking in trance, Piper sometimes practiced spirit writing.

3 Spiritualists sometimes turned the argument against them — they wanted too desperately to believe — back onto scientists: They wanted too much to disbelieve. Scientific hostility could be, in its own curious way, faith-like. The historian Peter Lamont notes that although Spiritualism is often considered a response to the "crisis of faith" provoked by the rise of Darwinian theory and biblical criticism, it can also be seen as the catalyst of a "crisis of evidence" (Lamont 2004).

him: He came from the cover of the '70s rock band Blue Öyster Cult's album *Agents of Fortune*. Some readers will know that this album features the band's big hit, "Don't Fear the Reaper," which might seem appropriate for Spiritualism, if edgier than the songs we tended to sing during services, like those of John Denver, ABBA, Rod Stewart, and other upbeat choices. But I had not been thinking along these lines. Rather, I had seen the album cover the night before. It was fresh in my visual memory. That's why I thought of it. Standing before a waiting audience, I was desperate to have something to say, and for that I needed a mental image, *any* mental image, to talk about. And here was that guy, cheerfully popping up from 1976 (or, rather, from last night), to help me out.

I rationalized the situation to myself: I had just been taught not to question impressions, but to speak them aloud. It doesn't matter if an image seems ridiculous to you. You have to have confidence. And, I thought, if a deceased person coincidentally happens to look like the figure on the album cover — I mean, there really *are* dapper men with mustaches and bowties in the world — wouldn't it make sense to show me the album cover so I could describe the real person accurately?

But my connection had static. I was not in tune as clearly or strongly as Vee and Priscilla had been. Most of the details I gave to Vee, prompted by Norman's questions and tallied by Lynette at the whiteboard, did not make sense to her. The only thing I could salvage from my attempt was that, when asked for letters associated with the man's name, I said F and J. (My logical mind protested: *Aunt Carole's husband was Francis J. Price — that's where you got it!*) Vee responded that the man she was thinking of had driven an FJ Holden. I was glad to claim this tiny victory.

* * *

The research project I had developed was a collaboration with Andrew Singleton, a sociologist from Melbourne. We had taught at the same university years earlier, and long talked about developing a project on religious life in Australia. We finally put

together a grant application to study Spiritualism, and were happily surprised when it was successful. Although we had worked hard on the proposal, and knew it would make a serious contribution to understanding Australia's religious history and trends, we were aware that grant reviewers increasingly insist on the kinds of things — changing public policy, strengthening national security, developing marketable technology, and so forth — that are not really offered by a project in which people speak with the dead.

The reviewers approved our project, agreeing that it was important to understand Spiritualism's social influence. By March 2017, we were ready to begin. The Canberra Spiritualist Association allowed me to make audio recordings of their services, always with mediums' permission. The vote did not actually face opposition, as I was on the church's committee by then. (Norman Ivory did urge me, twice, not to write anything that would expose the Association to ridicule.) The ethics boards at Andrew's and my universities had approved the project's methods. And the granting agency, the Australian Research Council, had sent the funds.

Just as the project officially began, the British medium Lynn Probert came to Canberra. Probert teaches mediumship at the Arthur Findlay College in Stansted Mountfitchet, Essex, England, between London and Cambridge. The College is part of the Spiritualists' National Union, which many Australians consider the peak of global Spiritualist expertise. This makes Lynn a rock star of mediumship. Her position at the Arthur Findlay College gives her prominence and authority, and she gives "demonstrations" (public mediumship readings) and workshops in Europe and the USA as well as the UK. This was not her first trip to Australia, nor even her first time in Canberra.

She spoke at four events during her March 2017 visit. She gave a public demonstration of mediumship on a Friday night, which around forty people attended. On Saturday, she held a daylong workshop for anyone who wanted to develop as a medium, whether they were seasoned professionals or rookies like myself. On Sunday morning, she gave a similar but shorter

workshop. Attendance at each workshop was in the low twenties, and all of the participants were women except for Norman and myself. These three events had entrance fees: 50 dollars for the demonstration, 150 dollars for the longer workshop, and 75 dollars for the shorter one. Finally, on Sunday afternoon, the CSA held its regular public service, and Lynn was the featured medium. All the events took place in a function room at the Gungahlin Lakes Golf Club, a social club in Canberra's north.[4]

The visit of a celebrated medium gave the weekend a jolt of adrenaline. This was a big deal for Spiritualists in Canberra. I felt lucky it was taking place just as the research project began, and, as it happened, the first thing Lynn said at her first event — after warming up the crowd with a joke about traveling with her mother — was extremely useful for my research. I will quote her at length:

> So, thank you for coming along tonight, and, who's never been to a demonstration before? Oh, so, some of you. Don't be scared. And just 'cause you're sitting at the back doesn't mean to say I won't get you. [The audience laughs.]
>
> But it's not me getting you, ultimately. Wherever you sit, wherever you are in the room, if your people in the spirit world are able to filter information through my mind and awareness — 'cause that's what they do — they will get to you, wherever you are.
>
> So, people think that mediums see the spirit world in full form and hear every word they say. And that's what we want. But that's not the fact of how it happens. Very much we move our mind — which is the hardest thing to do — out of the way, and try not to be too nosy, and they will provide us with information, and the way that we get that is in different ways. So it may come as a feeling, it may come as an emotion, it may come with an image, a symbol, a picture, a memory.

4 The CSA sponsored Lynn's trip to Canberra, and shared revenue from ticket sales with her, making a small profit.

And we as mediums then have to try and interpret it, and hopefully put it across in a way that you will understand.

So, it very much is a thing where we work together, so I will need you to respond to me….

And you know, people think they've got to be so *serious* when you come to things like this. Just 'cause someone's died in a physical sense, they haven't lost their humor and their ability to have fun with you. And to me, that's what it's all about. And when I go to do a demonstration, I look at it that I'm going to a party; I just don't know who I'm going to meet. 'Cause when we go to a party, we chat to someone for ten minutes, we get to know a bit about them, we talk, and then we go, "Lovely to talk to you," and we go off and talk to someone else. So, that's what we do as mediums when we demonstrate. We get to know people.

So, I'm going to have a party with your relatives and friends, and thank you for that. And you can join me if you wish.

But I will need you to talk back to me, and not just nod your head or shake your head. Because there's something in your voice that is like a recognition to the spirit world, and that helps me perceive information easier and hopefully stronger and more — to provide as much as I can for you. So… is that clear? Yes? [Some audience members respond "yes."] So, even if someone's got their hand up but you're understanding the information that I'm providing, please put your hand up. Because, just because someone's saying "yes" to me doesn't mean… that I'm exactly in the right place.

'Cause I always say my mediumship's like my… driving and my map reading. I never know where I'm going, but I get to the destination. [The audience laughs.] So, welcome to my world. [The audience laughs.]

So, hopefully that's all clear and I will work with as many of you as I possibly can this evening.

In this three-minute stretch of speech, Lynn offered three lessons for successful mediumship. The first is that you need to

be open to all kinds of impressions from the spirit world, from feelings to emotions to images, and be able to present them to your audience in a meaningful way, even if the meanings are not clear to you. The second is that a sense of humor is vital. Talking with dead people is not a cheerless lament, but a lively chat. Third, the audience needs to do more than just show up. Mediumship is a conversation running in two directions: from the spirit world to the medium and from the medium to her audience. The medium is a hinge point in the dialogue. If the audience does not respond clearly and strongly to what the medium says, the project fails.

Lynn's mediumship that night was impressive. In Chapter 4, I describe her remarkable conversation with the mother of a young man who died in a car accident. For now, I will turn to the lessons she taught at her mediumship-training workshops which began the next day.

* * *

Lynn began Saturday morning's workshop by asking who had not done mediumship before. A few hands popped up, including mine. Perhaps because so many audience members had some experience, the first part of the morning was mostly a question-and-answer session.

Lynn's responses to our questions made mediumship seem both fun and serious, hard work and second nature. "I don't think about what I do," she said at one point. "I just do it so naturally." But she added that what mattered was "practice, practice, practice." When a woman asked Lynn how she transitioned out of mediumship at the end of a session, she said it was like turning a switch, or, after driving, locking your car and walking away. When she works, she works. When she's done, she's done.

Spiritualists make a key distinction between psychic work, in which two minds communicate telepathically, and mediumship, which requires contact with people in the spirit world. A lesson I heard many times during my research was that all mediums are psychic but not all psychics are mediums. Lynn explained

this distinction further, telling us that psychic vibrations come from ourselves and are heavier, whereas spiritual vibrations are lighter. In learning to sense your own vibes, then, you should learn to feel the intensity of the energy, recognizing when a message is coming from the spirit world and when it is coming from the person sitting in front of you.

Lynn's main instruction that first morning was that we should focus on sensing the character of a person in the spirit world rather than their physical appearance. Describing a person in the spirit world as "old" is pointless in most cases. In children's memories, every adult is old. Different audience members will have different images of a person. And mediums should not waste time on unimportant details. Understanding a person's character — their essence, what they were really like — was Lynn's gold standard for mediumship.

Then we began to practice. Lynn asked most people to pair up voluntarily, but assigned me to work with a woman in her eighties whom I will call Benedetta. Benedetta had come to Australia from Italy many decades ago. She clearly found mediumship appealing, and felt she had a connection to the unseen world, but seemed keenly aware that the Catholic Church would disapprove of what she was doing.

She went first. She said her shoulders felt heavy. I thought of my father in his final stages of cancer. But Benedetta was frustrated, not knowing how to proceed after this first sensation. Lynn came over and coached her with gentle questions about the spirit's character. Some of her answers made good sense to me, if it was my father. He had worked with his mind rather than his hands. (Yes.) He was more private than sociable. (Yes.) He was a hard worker. (Maybe?) But she also said he had long hair and a big family, which was not the case for my father, nor any other deceased family member I knew. This was a brief reading, and we left it there, without firm conclusions.

Then it was my turn. I tried to concentrate by not concentrating.

I saw an image in my mind of a little girl, so I said this. I said there was a feeling of calmness and happiness. Benedetta

said she did not know who the girl could be. Lynn had come by again, and asked me who this girl was connected to. There had to be a link between her and Benedetta. This instruction prompted a new image in my mind, a thin, middle-aged man with dark hair. I said so. Benedetta thought this might be her father.

Then things got interesting. But they got interesting not because of my skills, but because of Benedetta's revelations. She said that her father had had seven children, but that he had also slept with a prostitute and fathered another daughter. Benedetta was the only one of his children he had told about this. And, for some reason, he had also named this daughter out of wedlock "Benedetta."[5] Benedetta thought the spirit I was in contact with might be her half-sister and namesake. I had an urge to tell the living Benedetta that this girl felt a positive connection with her. In other words, besides having pictured the girl, I felt emotionally that she *liked* Benedetta — that there was warmth and happiness in her presence. This was a diffuse feeling, and typing this now, several years later, I can't recapture it or put into compelling prose, but it was the kind of fleeting sensation I would come to expect when I practiced mediumship: a vanishing moment turned into something tangible through conversation.

Benedetta seemed very happy with the reading to which she, of course, had contributed the key details. Later, she read coffee grounds for me from my morning cup of espresso.

I was disoriented. I had simply mentioned images that popped into my head, and somehow persuaded a kindly grandmother to reveal a family secret and take solace in a connection with her secret and presumably now dead half-sister. Was this it, then? Could I say I was a medium after one brief success? Because, despite my awkwardness and doubts, it was a success. There was now a person in the world who, among her countless life experiences on different sides of the globe for most of a cen-

5 That is, the name was the same as my practice partner's ("Benedetta" is a pseudonym).

tury, felt I had put her in touch with a deceased family member. I was skeptical, enthralled, and confused, all at once.

* * *

I hope some readers understand my discomfort. My sympathy and enjoyment of Spiritualism, and Spiritualist mediumship, could never fully escape my skepticism. When talking about (and perhaps with) other people's deceased loved ones, I was excited by the possibility of connection, yet worried that I was forcing myself to be credulous for the purpose of making people feel good. But I quickly learned that I was thinking about mediumship the wrong way. Or rather, there are many different ways of thinking about mediumship, but only one way that works if you want to do it well.

When I began trying to do mediumship, I thought of it like baseball. A tough pitcher is on the mound, and he throws a sharp curveball. You see it coming, know it's about to swerve and dip, and time your swing to — hopefully — connect. But if that pitcher is really good, you might bail out, or swing and miss by a mile. So too with mediumship, I had thought, you have your moment: a chance to give a person meaningful information. Either you connect or you don't. "I'm sensing an aunt who died of respiratory failure." (Strike one.) "She lived on a farm for much of her life." (Strike two.) "I'm also getting the name 'Agnes.'" (Home run!)

This is not the productive way to think about mediumship. Rather than sports, mediumship is like music. Say you sit down at a piano to play. You might play fluidly, hitting all the notes and expressing the passion you feel. Or you might play disastrously, muffing everything, feeling lost, embarrassed that the music in your body is dying at your fingertips. Or, like John Cage, you might sit down at the piano, play nothing for four and half minutes, and call it music anyway. The point is that unlike swinging at a curveball, where you might miss completely, in making

music you can't fail in the same way. No matter how bad, idiosyncratic, or perplexing a performance is, it's still music.[6]

Mediums begin from the premise that the spirit world is real, and people who live there — people on the astral plane of existence (see Chapter 6) — want to communicate with their living loved ones. Spiritualists insist that this is not a matter of faith. As they see it, these claims are proven each time a medium connects with someone in the spirit world. But not all mediums are equally skilled, and like everyone, they have days when they are full of color and energy and days when they are not. So a good medium might stand before an audience, speak out her sensations, and receive only the dull thump of "no," "no," "no" in return. This does not mean, to a committed Spiritualist, that spirits are not real. It means the medium is having a bad day. Or it means the audience isn't paying enough attention, and the medium might need to draw on psychic energies instead of spiritual ones to offer something, anything, to her listeners.

At Lynn's weekend workshops, I had five more one-on-one sessions. She varied the exercises to deepen our knowledge of mediumistic technique. For example, in one session, we were told to begin not by identifying the spirit in terms of their basic characteristics (sex, age, and so forth), but rather to try to sense their character. Never mind if it was a young woman or old man — what was this person really like? Lynn said this approach could free us up while also having a "softer feeling," and perhaps make a stronger impression on us as mediums. My partner and I disappointed each other mightily in this exercise. She mentioned a bathrobe, and I thought of my mother's father; she added that this person was not a cranky old man, which he was. In return, I told her I saw cats, gardening, and trees, and

6 After writing this, I came upon the same comparison made by another author, although he emphasizes talent rather than possibility: "One analogy I have often used… is to point out that anyone can learn mediumship, just as anyone can learn to play the piano… but only a few will show a real aptitude for it and only very rarely will a 'Mozart' appear" (Wilson 2013, 73).

then a woman associated with these things. My fieldnotes here are blunt: my reading was "a complete strikeout."

In another exercise, I was paired with a well-known Canberra medium, Janet Adams, who delivered the reading I mentioned at the beginning of this book — the one with bells, goats, and cauliflower with cheese. Today, she mentioned a marching band and a twirling baton, and I felt a tingle of excitement because my mother used to be a baton-twirler. My mother is still alive, however, so my thoughts hopped over to her father. Janet mentioned tennis, and I was intrigued, because a partner from the previous day's workshop had mentioned tennis, too. But I had no idea if my grandfather had played tennis. (Later, I did what you are supposed to do in these cases: chase up verification. I asked my mother if her father played tennis. Yes, she said, when he got the chance.)

When it was my turn to read for Janet, I mentally saw a woman's dark and beautiful eyes (although I only saw one eye at a time), a red sports car, and people driving this car on a road through tall trees.

"She loved that car," Janet responded immediately. This was her mother, and she identified the scene I had described as a "shared memory" of a trip.

The practice sessions were decidedly mixed, then, in terms of how successful they seemed to be. Some were exhilarating. Some were flat. All were exhausting. In fact, because the mental experience of concentrating-on-not-concentrating was so draining, I had trouble recalling details afterward. My notes on the fourth session from the first day are ridiculously unrevealing:

> Then we did the fourth pairing-up. I was quite tired by now, and the new twist was kind of complicated. We were to be in touch with a spirit and compare their philosophy of life when they were alive (e.g., were they an optimist or a pessimist) with how they see life and their families now. I don't remember the details of this interaction except that my reader, Ariadne, seemed to identify Gerry [my father] and I identified

> a sisterly type that Ariadne did not recognize. But she (Ariadne) was very encouraging and told me not to self-criticize.

That's all I wrote. Although I wish I had written more, clearly I couldn't. Fresh after the event, my mind had already begun forgetting it, not because it was unpleasant but because it was inherently fleeting: a wave that crests, dreaming before an audience.

These intense sessions were interleaved with discussions and advice from Lynn, as well as lunch (on the first day) and coffee breaks, meaning we had time to recuperate from our spiritual trips. Lynn gave practical tips. For example, when attuning — relaxing your mind, feeling your own energy, and preparing to do mediumship — you should declare your intention to the spirit world. You can do so by mentally saying a phrase like "I'm here to be within my own power, to open my mind and awareness to those in the other world that will be recognized by the person that sits before me" — or, more simply, "Take me to the greatest need." She then had us practice "sitting in our own power" to sense our energy while she played a recording by Krishna Dass.[7] She also gave tips on how to develop techniques for getting specific information. For example, one woman said she wanted to work on knowing relationships — that is, the relationship between the person in the spirit world and the recipient in the audience — and Lynn recommended visualizing a family tree. Another woman wanted to know how to link spirits with places, and Lynn suggested picturing a map. Norman said that he wanted to know full names and addresses of the spirits, and Lynn joked that she wanted to know these, too.[8]

What impressed me most about her teaching was her emphasis on speaking the right way. It would be too simple to say that

7 At the time, I did not realize that a fellow attendee, Norman, was having prophetic visions as Dass's music played. He describes them in Ivory (2020, 216–18).

8 I learned later that the ability to know "full names and addresses" of people in the spirit world was a skill claimed by the leading British medium Gordon Higginson; see Bassett (1993, 20).

being a medium only means talking like one. But talking the right way makes an enormous difference. Lynn gave bits of advice on speaking which, I learned from attending CSA services, are cardinal principles of good mediumship.

The first rule is that a medium speaks plainly. Although your work is outside the social mainstream, you speak like you would in everyday conversation. "We have to really think about how we term things, and the vocabulary that we use," Lynn admonished. She said she was frustrated by jargon, like calling people in the spirit world "entities" or "energy." They are *people,* she said — mothers and fathers, for example. So call them that.

The second rule is that a medium should speak with discretion. In one of the question-and-answer sessions, I asked Lynn if she had ever received a message from the spirit world that she felt she should not pass on. (I couldn't help but wonder: What if you sensed that the spirit you were communicating with was angry or disappointed with the living?) She said no, this does not really happen. But sometimes, a medium receives information that is meant to give her broader knowledge about the subjects she is dealing with. If a medium stands before a big audience, Lynn said, and that audience includes parents whose three-year-old daughter had been murdered, the medium might receive this information — but only so she would know what a horrific experience the family had been through, and to proceed with sensitivity. The medium should not say that the daughter had been "murdered," but that the daughter's life had been taken from her by another's hands. Lynn added that some mediums insist that all information from the spirit world should be passed on to the living, but she disagreed. The daughter would not want her parents to be reminded of the events. The family would not want to be reminded of them, either (in front of a crowd of strangers, no less). And the audience did not need to know.

The third rule was the one I mentioned earlier, which was stressed throughout Lynette and Norman's mediumship course: Have confidence. Be in control. After you describe the characteristics of a person in the spirit world, Lynn said, don't ask "Who understands?" Rather, say "Who am I with?" This is more

definite, and does not suggest that you need to keep adding verifying material. Also, don't say "Let me get you a little bit more information." Don't explain how you're working. Just work.

With these basic rules of speaking, one can pass as a medium. But as with all speech meant to persuade or convince, some listeners will respond positively and some will not. Or, to turn the claim around: My good medium might be your bad one. The medium who astonishes you by describing your great-grandmother might perplex me by describing nothing and no one I can recognize. Despite the long history of scientific testing of psychic and mediumistic claims, mediumship is always and necessarily a deeply subjective relationship between speakers and hearers. There is no gold standard for what counts as effective mediumship.

Nonetheless, some mediums persuade more people than others.

* * *

In mediumship, you quiet your mind, but you are not passive. You mentally let the spirit world know you are ready and willing to communicate. When something unexpected comes to you — sight, sound, scent, or other sensation — you pass on what you have received. Over time, a medium might learn that particular things she "sees" are symbols in her personal library. For example, a pink ribbon tied around a tree might mean love and not an actual ribbon or tree. But you often say what you see, directly. Then you ask people in the spirit world for further information as necessary, and you speak, confident that you are connecting two worlds. Some mediums are obviously more sophisticated at doing this than newbies who stand up and describe Blue Öyster Cult album covers. In her workshops and demonstration, Lynn had given us a master class in how to be a medium. Now, in Lynette and Norman's twenty-week course, I was prepared to work with these lessons and see if my baby steps could become longer and steadier strides.

In most sessions of the Ivorys's course, two students were called upon to practice mediumship before the group. We did not know in advance if we were going to be called that night. Some weeks when I wasn't called, I was relieved, because trying to do mediumship made me anxious. As it happened, over the course's twenty weekly meetings, I missed five sessions, limiting my chances a bit more. Even so, I had enough attempts at mediumship to experience some notable moments.

For example, in the fourth class session, I stood up and felt I could connect a person in the spirit world with Vee, the artist. This time, I had a bodily sensation: the woman in the spirit world had fingers that were dexterous but arthritic, and I moved my own fingers as I both felt and conveyed this sensation. I am not comfortable in my own body, so feeling someone else's bodily sensations seemed like a breakthrough to me.

Earlier that night, Lynette had described mental mediumship as involving a "very light trance," and I could understand what she meant. You are aware of your surroundings, and you are holding a conversation with a living partner, but you are also trying to hold a mental conversation with a dead partner, and you can feel a kind of detachment and heightened energy at the same time. As a result — and as I noticed after Lynn's exercises — recalling details afterward was difficult. My notes from that night's class are downright primitive: "Vee mentioned that this person had been a musician; I think it was her mother, but I can't actually recall."[9]

I decided to make audio recordings of my classroom attempts at mediumship. After all, I was recording the CSA's Sunday ser-

9 The anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, who has worked extensively with modern Pagans and evangelical Christians, identifies the key psychological state as *absorption:* "the mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and to most imaginative experiences in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas or images or fascinations" (2012, 201). Luhrmann describes how utterly enraptured she was reading fantasy books as a child, and suggests that this ability to lose oneself in wonder is a skill cultivated by those looking to communicate with magical and divine beings. See also Tomlinson (2019).

vices to learn how mediums worked, so it made sense to record my own efforts. In my first recording, from the eighth week of the course, I went once again to Vee. This time I saw a man with a beard. Many of the details were run-of-the-mill. He had a reddish face and curly hair. He was probably an uncle or great-uncle. A bit stocky, and wearing a gray and green sweater, he enjoyed his beer, but probably not to excess. I sensed something in my belly, so I suggested that he might have died from stomach troubles.

And somehow, I began to quote him. In mental mediumship, you don't change your voice tone, so this was just me speaking in my regular New Jersey accent. Here is what I said, or he said, that night: "I could have made it another ten years if I'd gone to the doctor earlier.… I had a good long life, but you know it could have been even more." And then: "Well, I wasn't a saint, but people weren't upset when I showed up. They… were happy when I was there. But this doesn't mean — I wasn't some… saintly type of person." I didn't hear him audibly, and I didn't feel like he was doing the talking for me. This was my mind and my voicebox. But they were his words, it seemed to me. This was him expressing his own character.

The most striking feature of the reading was not the words themselves, but an image that popped into my mind. I mentally asked the man what he wanted to show Vee, and I saw his hands unfold in a V shape, and a white bird fly out. I guessed the bird was a dove, and suggested to Vee that it was related to peace. What excited me was that this vision was genuinely unexpected. I had not been thinking about peace. I had not been thinking about unfolding hands. I had worried that the image of the bearded man was somehow a mashup of my friend Rod Ewins and the actor Albert Finney, and looking back, I wonder if Vee's name suggested the image of hands in a V shape. But the bird — where did *that* come from?

When I finished the reading, and Lynette asked Vee about the things I had said, it became clear that I had gotten one major detail wrong. I had said twice that I did not think this man was a manual laborer, despite his rugged, stocky appearance. But

Vee, who identified this man as her uncle, said that he had in fact been a builder. The bird, for Vee, was suggestive. "Well," she reflected during the general discussion, "I'm not very close with his children for a reason." She didn't speak with her cousins, and said she wondered if her uncle might be suggesting something to her. She trailed off. Lynette gently suggested that the message might not be to make peace with her cousins, but that Vee should make peace with herself.

Vee said she accepted the connection, meaning she was persuaded that I had really brought through her uncle. I was happy about this, of course. I might not be a skilled medium, but I was getting somewhere. What excited me most was seeing that bird. This was a rare moment when my mind loosened up enough to receive an impression that felt random — or, at least, not an obvious projection from myself.

* * *

I was learning, following the lessons of seasoned mediums like Lynn, Lynette, and Norman, to think of people in the spirit world as regular folks. They are people just like us. They continue to lead lives of work, pleasure, learning, and family commitment. The difference is that they exist on the astral plane, at a more refined level of energy than we do. My skepticism protested this claim, and still does, but suspending the skepticism for a moment means you get better results. When I practiced mediumship in our classroom training sessions, I did so in good faith, trying to do a proper job, and usually things went reasonably well, even when my delivery was rushed and clumsy. I moved from thinking of mediumship as a sport to thinking of it as music, something that exceeds your control but which you can always tap into. You can't fail at making music, although you might not make particularly good music on any given day.

In learning to think of spirits as normal people, then, I started to sense them as characters. I mean this in the sense of a gestalt, an overall impression: this kind of person, that kind of person, their attributes fitting together. In the second recording I made

of myself practicing mediumship, I identified a spirit who had a message for Norman. The theme was slender elegance. All of the notes harmonized with that ideal. Here was a woman in her sixties with silver hair and long, thin fingers, wearing what I described confusingly as a "sedate but beaded red necklace," and holding an old-fashioned cigarette holder. Once again, I began speaking for the spirit, saying of the woman's cigarette holder, "This is my style." And: "When I danced, that's how I danced, too," meaning she danced with elegance and refinement.

This sounds like bad fiction, a projection from a 1940s movie of what elegant old-fashioned women were like: *Dahhhling!* But I had not planned this. I sensed it and spoke it. Norman, who was always a very encouraging audience member, said, "I've got someone who it could be, yes."

"Okay," I replied.

"I'm not certain," he said, "but it could be."

I kept going, saying that she had died painlessly in her sleep. I then reported how she felt about it: "But this is interesting, she's saying she wasn't confused. She's saying, 'I… went to sleep alive, and I didn't wake up, but I passed [away], but it was seamless, it was very smooth. When I… went to the other side, I knew where I was.'" I remember feeling that her lack of confusion clashed with my own expectations. If a person went to sleep, and then woke up on the astral plane, they might be disoriented, yes? But I got the sense that she was saying no. She knew what had happened to her.

The statement about confusion struck Norman as significant, too. He said it "gives me a pointer also to the same person I'm thinking about." But in the discussion after the reading, he explained that "she was considered to be confused most of the time in her life. Yes, I won't say anything else. I might upset her." This last line prompted a laugh from Lynette. It bothered me, though, that what I thought the woman meant by confusion seemed to be different from what Norman thought she meant. I thought she was explaining that she knew she had died in her sleep. Norman thought she was answering people who had criticized her as confused while she was alive. Our understandings

might not have matched, but we had put together a coherent dialogue around the idea of confusion itself.

The third and final recording I made in Lynette and Norman's course felt like a culmination, because it included both my most fulfilling moment and a sharp comedown. For me, these readings showed how I had changed — I had started to take successful steps in mediumship — and also how far I had to go if I wanted to get good at it.

I began by explaining that during the attunement, I had a vision of walking through snow in a farmer's field, seeing the boots I wore as a child. I was crunching along through the snow. Now the farm seemed summery, with golden fields and a fence. I knew I had to get to the fence. Such a dreamlike vision, with its impossible transition and meld of things only I knew — those old boots! — with things I didn't know at all.

I said:

> And I walked there, and there was a farmer. There was a man there who was a farmer. He actually had a pitchfork. He had a… lean face, he was very lean in his body type. And he had a lined face. Lines on his face. Deep lines. He was… a real farmer. And I… tried speaking to him, communicating. I said, "Who are you here for?" And at first I thought he said, you know, "They'll — the person will know, the person who I'm for will know." But I kept thinking on it, and he said "Priscilla." And I was trying to work with this. This was just during the attunement period. I was trying to stay with this vision.
>
> And I would say he was probably in his sixties or seventies. Very healthy, very fit, lean farmer, farmer clothes. He did have a pitchfork. And the next bit of information I got was a river. There was a river next to this farm. And he said that you and he were there together, that this is a place you were with him together, that you would remember that.
>
> So, I see a man in his sixties or seventies, clean shaven, lined face, certainly a farmer, and he said that you and he

> were together by a river. Does this — have any recognition for you?

It feels odd to quote myself like this. But then, from a Spiritualist perspective, this scene is the farmer's, not mine. And while the scene, taken as a whole, reminds me somewhat of Aunt Carole's and Uncle Frank's country home in Mehoopany, Pennsylvania — where my family spent New Year's holidays in the 1970s and 1980s and I crunched through snow in those boots — the pitchfork seems such a silly detail that, even though it's a farm, it feels out of place.

Priscilla responded positively: "I may have been very young when I was there." She added that she had known a farmer, and thought he would have had a lined face.

I said okay, then paused for eleven seconds. I don't recall how or what I felt during that time, but when I started to speak again, it was clear that the river had become the focus: "You need to go there for some reason," I insisted. It was a spiritual reason — "like a homecoming, or a pilgrimage, or whatever you want to call it." I went on to say that the man didn't drink, but I did see him smoking a cigarette. Then I concluded, "And that's what he's saying. Return to the river.… You may not be able to go physically, but… he's saying somehow you have to be able to be back there, at the riverside. That's what I've got."

Lynette now stepped in, saying, "Ask… him if he's connected in a relationship way. How he passed." In my rush to the river, I had skipped over essential details.

After a pause, I responded:

> He's saying neighbor.… And he died on the farm. He had a heart attack, in his seventies. But… another thing he's saying you'll know is that he buried a child. There was a — he had a child. You may not have known the child, but you know that he buried a child. And I think he buried the child on the farm, which sounds odd, but that's what he said.

I had given the details Lynette asked for, and added a macabre new one: the burial of a child. If this was my subconscious talking, it sounded like drunk talk, my imagination on a bender, anxious and staggering about.

But now Priscilla said, "Yeah, I've got who it is."

Lynette asked, "So that clarifies who it is?"

"Yeah. Yeah, absolutely."

Lynette said "Okay," and Priscilla seemed to close the matter by saying, "Yeah. That's great. Thank you." But I felt I had to emphasize the message one more time, so I said: "Yeah, that's it. He's saying… go back to that river."

Here, as in all my attempts at mediumship, my primary sense was intuition. I did not hear a man's voice speaking these words. I just knew the words, and that they were his. After intuition, my second most used sense in mediumship was visual: farm, snow, boots. I never heard spirit words audibly, nor tasted or smelled anything, as some mediums do.

Our conversation in class continued:

PRISCILLA: Yeah. Do you want some feedback?
LYNETTE: Yes, please.
MATT: Sure.
PRISCILLA: It was my grandfather.
MATT: Oh!
PRISCILLA: … I wouldn't say it's neighbor. I'd say it's my father's father.
MATT: Okay.
PRISCILLA: He lived 'til he was eighty-seven.
MATT: Oh, okay.
PRISCILLA: Which, back then, was a long time.
MATT: Yeah.
PRISCILLA: He buried his first child. His first child—ah, it was terrible. My grandmother was fifteen years younger than him. And they went out to dinner on a horse and sulky. And somebody looked after him, and put Vicks Vaporub underneath his [inaudible], and he lost his breath.
MATT: Oh.

PRISCILLA: And he was — his name was Keith.
MATT: Oh.
PRISCILLA: And he was buried in 1915.
MATT: Oh.
PRISCILLA: So, yeah. And… it would've been the Murrumbidgee [River] he was talking about. And the reason why he's telling me to go back is because — this is really strange. My grandmother planted a tree. And all my childhood, we used to see the tree. Nobody documented — we don't even know where the tree is now. It may well still be there…. I was very close to my father. And, yeah, they were just salt-of-the-earth types of people. And also I've been told that my son, who's the one who doesn't really know what he wants to do with life, may well be going to get a block of land in years to come, and may be into… growing bio-whatever.
MATT: Ah ha ha.
PRISCILLA: So that may well be connected [inaudible].
MATT: So, returning.
PRISCILLA: Yeah. That's amazing. Thank you.
MATT: Ah, thank you.
PRISCILLA: Yeah.
NORMAN: That's interesting, because I don't think they use… a pitchfork much these days.
MATT: That — well, I definitely saw that. And it, for me it feels like the stereotypical farmer, but there it was.
LYNETTE: It's probably… to confirm he was a farmer.

My surprise is comically clear in the transcript, with my yelp of "Oh!" when Priscilla identifies the man as her grandfather, and my meek string of "ohs" and "okays" afterward. But here, as always, is the paradox of mediumship. While two details were strangely and compellingly right — her grandfather had buried a child, and the river was an important site for family connections — another was completely wrong: He was Priscilla's grandfather, not her neighbor. So I am not sure, looking back, whether my surprised "Oh!" was embarrassment that I had been

so wrong about who this man was, or surprised that I had been right enough for Priscilla to be sure.

If this was the high point of my mediumship training, I quickly came back to earth. Lynette asked me to do a second reading, and I brought through a middle-aged woman with reddish hair, medium build, and "an elegant small purse with a strap over her shoulder." The woman had a message for Lynette, and it was slightly combative: Lynette had thought this woman made mistakes during her life, but the woman was happy with her choices. Lynette asked if I could identify their relationship. I said, "We worked together, but it's not necessarily office work. We… were doing, sort of, projects together." Lynette asked for a name. Fiona, I thought and replied. Lynette charitably said she could think of someone who sort of fit, but she had known her when she was young, and had no idea if she was dead now. Norman tried to help by suggesting an adult woman Lynette had known, but Lynette said she would have heard if that woman had died. "There's a couple of people there that might fit the bill," Lynette mused, "but I don't want to fit it." As the medium, I had not given persuasive enough evidence, and the reading ended without a firm conclusion.

* * *

The small size of Lynette and Norman's mediumship course was a challenge. Once you know everyone and have heard them talk about their families, you limit your chances of generating anything fresh. Having more people in the room builds a more lively feeling, a greater energy. Lynette and Norman acknowledged this, saying the course would be better if it were bigger.

But it was an effective course. Along with Lynn's workshops, it changed me. I was still awkward and full of doubt when trying to contact the dead, but I had experienced moments when audience members affirmed that a detail made harmonic sense. As a result, I had felt a combination of surprise and determination. I still wasn't sure what I was doing, but I wanted to do it well. Although I hadn't gotten good, I had gotten better. On a few

occasions, things had worked startlingly well. On others, they had trailed off, inconclusively. Even in the best moments, I got key details wrong, which, I came to understand, all mediums do.

What struck me, and sticks with me, is the sense of mediumship as speaking in a new key. You stand before a group of people, trying not to think. You remain open to mental impressions. They pop into your head: visions, ideas, hard-to-pin-down sensations. You say what you sense, whether it's what a person looks like, the color of the car they drove, or their fingers — now your fingers — strumming the air. All this needs to be put into words, and audience members should respond. Sometimes they stay mute, and you press on. Sometimes they respond negatively, saying these details don't make sense, and you press on. Sometimes they agree strongly with what you're saying, and you might feel a jolt of surprise before pressing on. You speak plainly: a chat, not a chant. You speak diplomatically, avoiding the sensational. But most of all, you speak confidently. This is its own kind of music.

CHAPTER 3

The Sense of a Story

If this book were a movie, I would now join a development circle to train with other mediums in small groups. Then I would raise the stakes by going "on platform" at church services to give public demonstrations. First I would succeed, and get overconfident. Then I would fail, and be chastened. Finally, in the closing minutes and over a swelling orchestral soundtrack, I would succeed once again, or learn that success meant something other than what I had expected.

Because this is real life, things did not work out that way. I did not join a development circle, nor perform as a medium at services of the Canberra Spiritualist Association or any other group. I did, however, attend CSA services regularly to learn how skilled mediums work. I got more exposure by going to Spiritualist events in the USA, UK, and Norway. And I learned a key lesson: how to be an audience member, or how to hear mediumship.

This might not sound like much of a challenge. How hard is it to sit in a crowd? But listening is active, not passive. One has to learn to respond to mediums' words in particular ways, to give by receiving. Audience members, in concert with mediums, can make good or bad music.

Just as mediums prepare to get in touch with the spirit world, so too should audience members get ready for spirit communi-

cation to take place. At a CSA service in March 2018, Jane Hall explained her technique before she began her work. She urged audience members to invite their late friends and family to come to the service. People in the spirit world, Jane said,

> know where they need to go.… But I think it's really important to send out thoughts to your loved ones on the way to one of these events, and just ask them to step forward with you. "Come journey with me today." And that energy just brings them forward, brings them closer. So I invite you to… think of your… friends in the spirit world, and your family in the spirit world, and ask them to join us… so I can blend with them.
>
> So, today, I ask that the spiritual world join me and blend their energy — so close that I may feel them. And that I may provide healing to the people in the audience, or in the spirit world. And that's what I do. That's what I do to start my work. I blend. I ask them to step so close to me that I may feel them… so I can prove that they haven't died.

Jane seems to suggest that the medium's work and the audience's work are not that different from each other. True, the medium's special task is to "blend" with a person from the spirit world, sensing and feeling as that person does. But this blending is only partly under the medium's control. The deceased person needs to want to come through. It helps if audience members have sent an invitation.

However, many audience members don't act the ways mediums want them to. In Spiritualism, there are several kinds of bad audience member. One is the clueless listener. This is someone who fails to recognize convincing signs the medium relays from the spirit world. Many mediums have stories about such audience members who sit there, saying "no" or being puzzled during the reading, then come up after the service and say something like, "Oh, *now* I know who you were talking about! It was my grandmother. Everything you said was right, but it took me awhile to get it."

When I interviewed Sarah Jeffery about her mediumship, she recalled an especially difficult reading along these lines:

> I've had some bizarre experiences. I've had a lady sit in front of me, and I said, "I've got a gentleman here with burns all down half his face." She looked at me, vacant. "No." I'm thinking: that's a pretty specific piece of evidence, y'know. You would *know* if you knew someone who had burns all across one side of the face.
>
> So the second time: "No." I'm thinking, oh dear, this is — I can't throw this evidence away. It's so specific!
>
> So I said it one more time, but I did the sort of physical movement of — you would have seen him putting compresses or cream on his face. And it was only as I put my hand to my face and showed her that that she looked at me, she said, "That's my dad!"
>
> Now… the look on your face was the look on my face…. *How can this girl not have realized it's dad?* Anyhow, she went on to tell me that her dad didn't believe in mediumship. She had just been to his graveside and spoken to him in her mind. And she was absolutely sure that there was no way her dad would come through. So, she had just created this false reality that her dad *wouldn't* communicate. So it took her all that time for her mind to actually switch to, "Oh my God, that's my dad."… [T]he recipient comes with all sorts of preconceptions as to what can happen, who might come through.

Another kind of bad audience member is the "grabber" or "body snatcher," who thinks every reading is for him or her. You might be sitting in the audience, and the medium says she has connected with a man who was a great joker, smoked cigars, loved playing cards, and died in his fifties from heart failure. This sounds like your uncle, so you get ready to respond. Now, *swoop,* in comes the body snatcher, raising his hand and telling the medium he thinks he knows who it might be — his cousin's friend knew a guy like this in Bendigo back in the '60s. Because mediums often face audiences in which several people indi-

cate they recognize the person being described, good mediums patiently add details to sort through the possibilities, eventually identifying one audience member as the likely recipient. People who initially raised their hands might then be satisfied that this wasn't their uncle, after all — or be frustrated that their reading was grabbed by a body snatcher.

A third kind of bad audience member is an overly critical one. Janet Adams, addressing a CSA service in July 2017, told a story about dealing with such a person:

> The other day I was in Albury, and I said, "I have a man by the name of Joe." It wasn't "Joe," it was "Joel," but I only heard the "J, o," okay? So I misinterpreted. And the person got hung up on the fact that I got the name wrong.
>
> Never get hung up on… things like that. Wait. Hear the medium through. But we got there eventually. 'Cause he kept saying, "It's Joel, it's Joel," and I'm going, "It's Joe, it's Joe?" There was so much noise around me, I could hardly hear.

The man in Albury insisted on "Joel" when the medium offered "Joe," the kind of minor mishearing that could happen in any conversation. The lesson from this part of Janet's talk was, in part, an instruction to audience members to behave properly. One lesson you learn by watching mediums work is that audience members are supposed to hold a delicate balance of attentiveness, receptiveness, and critical awareness — but often don't.

Learning to listen to mediums in the right way means, in part, managing your emotions. Wanting to hear from a specific deceased person means you are more likely to convince yourself that you are hearing from them, or to insist on ridiculously precise details which no medium can deliver. The former is a therapeutic trick — nice consolation, but for committed Spiritualists, ultimately empty — and the latter cuts off the possibility of meaningful engagement.

Mediumship is meant to be evidence-based. Good proof is good proof, but not all signs are proof, and not all audience members are listening in the right ways. Your faith should

not make you overinterpret what is being said. Indeed, "faith" should be irrelevant.

* * *

Canberra Spiritualist Association services are held on the first, third, and fifth Sundays of each month, with a summer break from mid-December to mid-January. As mentioned in the first chapter, they are held in a large, plain room in the community-center complex in the suburb of Pearce. In 2016–2018, I counted the total attendance at 45 services, and the respective numbers of men and women at 30 of them. I found that average attendance per service was between seventeen and eighteen people, and the proportion of women to men was two to one. At the end of 2017, the total number of paid-up members was eighteen, but by May 2019 it had increased to 26.[1]

Three people run the service. One person, always a CSA member, serves as the chairperson, whose responsibilities I describe below. Another person, with no official title, runs the laptop computer and audiovisual system. The featured performer is the medium. The schedule of which mediums will perform at which services is set months in advance. Mediums may or may not be paid-up members of the Association, but most live in Canberra. Of the ten mediums I saw work at CSA services, nine were women. I chaired six services, and ran the A/V system many times.

A typical service begins with the chair welcoming everyone, asking them to turn off their phones, and introducing the day's medium. Next comes a brief meditative session in which

1 I say "men" and "women," but on rare occasions youth attended. In counting them, I included girls with women and boys with men. I was not aware of any attendees identifying as transgender. The precise figures are: average attendance was 17.62 people per service, 68.7 percent females and 31.3 percent males. The most attendees at any service was 32 (once), and the fewest was ten (also once). A study of a Spiritualist congregation in Edinburgh found that only ten to eighteen percent of the audience there was male (Wilson 2013, 86).

audience members are told to focus their spiritual energies to send healing to the world. The chair often leads this part of the service, although sometimes she or he asks someone else to do it.[2] Then comes the first song. Music is meant to build spiritual energy, so audience members are encouraged to sing buoyantly to the recorded songs, intensifying a vibe which will help the medium do her work well. During my research with the CSA, the artist played most often was John Denver, including his songs "Eagles and Horses," "The Flower That Shattered the Stone," "The Wings That Fly Us Home," and "Looking for Space." One especially popular song is ABBA's "I Have a Dream."[3]

The first song is followed by a brief talk in which the chair reads out Spiritualism's "seven principles" (see Chapter 6) and offers brief commentary on them, sometimes selecting one on which to focus. Next, everyone sings the second song, continuing to build the energy in the room.

The day's featured medium then gives a speech which might be compared to a sermon. It is often an extended consideration of a spiritual topic: philosophy, instruction, and storytelling rolled together. Different mediums' personalities flower during these talks, with some giving chatty, personal performances and others adopting a lecturer's style, some even bringing scripts. After this address comes the third song.

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2 Spirit healing is an enormous topic in its own right. In this book I do not discuss it much because I prefer to keep the focus on mediums' conversations with their audiences, but it is addressed in chapter 5 of Singleton and Tomlinson (forthcoming). For much of my time at the CSA, the speaker was free to lead the healing however she or he wanted, but later Lynette Ivory developed a script for it.

3 Besides being sung at many CSA services, "I Have a Dream" is also in the songbook of Melbourne's Victorian Spiritualists' Union, the longest continually existing Spiritualist congregation in the world. My colleague Andrew Singleton has heard it sung at services in Ballarat, Ringwood, and Brisbane, and he and I also heard it sung at a service at the Arthur Findlay College in the United Kingdom. Debby Walker reported it being sung at a Spiritualist service in Christchurch, New Zealand (personal communication, July 16, 2018; see also Yerby 2017, 22–23 on hearing it at Lily Dale, the Spiritualist community in upstate New York). If there is an unofficial Anglophone Spiritualist anthem, this ABBA song is surely it.

With spiritual energy cresting, the medium gives the "demonstration," providing "proof of survival" — that is, communicating with people in the spirit world and passing on messages from them to audience members. Following the demonstration, the service winds down with a final song (usually Daniel O'Donnell's "Our Special Absent Friends"), brief notices from the chair, and two baskets being passed around to collect donations of coins and small bills.[4]

Norman Ivory often said that a chair's main job is to make sure the medium is safe. There are two dangers a medium might realistically face. The first is if she goes into trance and loses awareness of her surroundings, running the risk of tripping over a wire or banging into something. As Janet Adams put it at a CSA service in July 2017, "Trance is not something I do on platform anymore. I used to, but not anymore. Mainly because I'm a bit unsteady on my feet, and sometimes you can get a bit wobbly." However, I never saw mediums at the CSA go deeply into trance. They always seemed to be aware of their surroundings. The second possibility is that a rude, heckling audience member might show up. I was told that Australian Spiritualists had faced protests from evangelical Christians in past years. During my research, however, no meeting was ever disrupted this way. Sometimes a lost person would wander in, looking for another event in the community-center complex, but usually an audience member rather than the chair went to help them.

Serving as the chair of several services, and more often running the A/V system, helped me understand the flow of Spiritualist ritual. But it was the sheer fact of being present at many services — of showing up and listening — that taught me the most about how mediumship works. In other words, even when I was just another audience member, I always learned something. One of the main lessons I learned was that good mediumship depends on having a good audience: an audience whose mem-

4 The medium is not usually paid, so the collection goes toward the CSA's operating costs, including room rental.

bers do not gobble up everything that comes their way, but do not reject all the signs before testing their evidential flavors.

And in this regard, the most important lesson I learned as a listener was to pay attention to how stories take shape.

* * *

Many authors have observed that narrative is foundational to human experience and understanding. Simply put, our brains think in stories. We expect the world around us to unfold in chains of before-and-after where things are not random, events have causes and effects, people have motives and personalities, and we can build greater senses of a meaningful world and our place in it.[5]

It would be natural, then, to think that stories have a central role in Spiritualist ritual. And they do — but not in a straightforward way.

Mediums sometimes tell stories in the speeches they give before their demonstrations. For example, at a service in October 2017, Debby Walker described an awkward moment when she was beginning to explore Spiritualism. Now in her mid-fifties, Debby had lost her grandmother around fifteen years earlier. She had been devastated: "I wanted to stay in touch with her," she explained in her strong New Zealand accent. "I wasn't ready to let go and believe that I could no longer talk to her, see her, or feel her around me. We had a connection, a very strong bond. And I wasn't quite sure how life was going to go for me without her around."

So Debby decided to try Spiritualism. She went to a meeting in Wellington, where she was living at the time.

> I remember sitting there, hoping and praying for a message, firstly to know that there were people on the other side who

5 For the argument that humans universally and interactively create meaningful experience through narrative, key sources include Bruner (1991), Labov (2013), and Ochs and Capps (2001).

> loved me and were interested in me, and that I could trust what they said. For a lot of my experiences to that point had been ones with a lack of trust….
>
> One medium standing on platform looked across at me in the audience as I was in the seat. And I'd put my elbow out on the next seat — I thought in a relaxed pose, and the hope that, oh, maybe Nanna'd come through, 'cause I'm nice and relaxed. I'm not all, "Come on, Nanna, where are you?"
>
> Unfortunately, or fortunately, he did come to me. But his… first comment was that I looked bored. I wasn't really there. I was just sitting there, going, "Oh, yeah, okay, ho hum, ho hum." Isn't it… the way of our world, where one person makes a judgment based on their own experiences? He had never lived my life, didn't know why I was sitting there like this, trying a new method to reach my grandmother, for her to come through. He just saw me as someone bored and disinterested.
>
> Nevertheless, he gave me a reading. And my Nanna did come through. So that was quite good.

Debby's story has a lot happening within a simple framework. And everything harmonizes: the poignancy of her desire to contact her grandmother, the humor of her attempt to be relaxed, the medium's misinterpretation of her pose, and the ultimate success of the reading. I have quoted it at length to show how mediums tell stories in their speeches, and also because it reveals how mediums expect audience members to behave: respectfully, attentively, and not leaning casually across the seat next to them.

When communicating with the spirit world during demonstrations, mediums cannot tell stories in this way. The signs they get from the spirit world are fragments: sights and sounds, tastes and smells, intuitions. They relate these signs to the audience, and the person who responds (the "recipient") has to recognize them as bits of a character who features in a constellation of memories. If a medium did offer a full narrative — "I'm in touch with a lady who took a trip to the Yucatán in the '70s, where she met her future husband, who was her tour guide at Chichen Itza

and asked her to take a photo of them on a frisky burro in front of the Temple of Kukulkan" — it would prove either that she was best medium in the world or an astonishingly clumsy fraud.

Audience members are constrained during the reading, instructed by mediums not to give too much information. They are told to respond "yes," "no," or "I don't know" to the medium's questions. They are not supposed to give information beyond basic verification, rejection, or minor clarification. If a recipient starts to tell a story or give details about what a dead person was like, the medium usually cuts them off, saying: It's my job to give you the evidence. Sometimes audience members ask for more details from the medium before deciding how to respond. For example, at a CSA service in July 2017, the medium brought through the spirit of a woman who did not live to an old age, loved her cats, and travelled a lot. An audience member thought this sounded a bit like her husband's aunt, but was not ready to commit fully: "She certainly travelled a lot. But, I must say, there'd have to be something more to clinch it." In other words, the audience member was politely saying that she did not yet feel the evidence was strong enough to know this was really her husband's aunt coming through — but she was willing to be persuaded.

Storytelling has a finely balanced position in mediumship. In one sense, mediumship sanctifies narrative. It treats characters and events as objects of creative ritual focus. It points to eternal life by reminding people of shared events with their deceased loved ones. But in another sense, mediumship thrives by *not* telling stories, at least not directly. The medium just gives you the threads. Later, you do the work of weaving the threads together, and in that weaving is an emotional coherence and completeness. Or, as the French philosopher Vinciane Despret (2021, 11) puts it evocatively, "The dead turn those who remain into story makers."

What especially skilled mediums do is offer hints of narratives, or what I came to call in my research notes "protonarratives": the sense of a story, the suggestion of a memorable event. For example, in a reading I will discuss in the next chapter, Lynn

Probert described the spirit of a young man by saying, "I feel that there was a suddenness to his passing. And as I get that sense, I know he would have passed in an accident…. And I know this was not his fault, regardless of anything that may have been said." This is not a fully fledged story, but rather an outline for one. When outlines resonate with audience members, as this one did with the man's mother, the sense of a story comes alive even as the story itself does not get told.

Learning to be an audience member, then, means learning to answer mediums directly—yes, no, I don't know—while suppressing your urge to say more, even as stories race through your mind and emotions flood your body. Being an effective audience member can be hard work.

* * *

I had a strange, exhilarating, and frustrating experience with this process during a service in March 2018. Jane Hall, the day's medium, was one of the liveliest presences on platform at the CSA. With shoulder-length blonde hair, her slender frame buzzing with energy and her Aussie-accented speech salted with youthful turns of phrase, Jane is a perpetual-motion medium.

Today, Jane's first reading brought through the spirit of a bridge-playing grandmother. In her second reading, she was in contact with the spirit of a man who liked cars. "I know all you men love cars," she joked, and offered a detail: the car was an Austin-Healey convertible. Also, this man had been overseas.

At this point, Jane, who knows I am American, asked me directly, "Am I with you, Matt?"

"I don't know," I said.

JANE: You don't know. Because I feel like… I have to go overseas as well with this gentleman. Would you understand your father to be in the spirit world?

MATT: Yes.

JANE: Okay. And would you understand that your father liked cars?…

MATT: As much as any man.
JANE: As much as anyone. Okay. Would you understand that your father would have liked to have had a nice car, like a convertible —
MATT: Yes.
JANE: — but didn't have an opportunity to?
MATT: In the '70s, he owned a Fiat.
JANE: A wha'?
MATT: Fiat.
JANE: A Fiat.
MATT: Yes.
JANE: Is that a convertible?
MATT: No, it was — it was a sporty Italian car in the '70s. It —
JANE: Okay!
MATT: — was a bright yellow.
JANE: And you're saying he… liked cars as much as anyone! [Laughs.] And he lives abroad. He lived abroad.
MATT: Yes.

This looked like a tipping point in the reading. Jane was saying in a playful and confident way that she was clearly right. She saw a man living overseas. He liked cars. My father lived his whole life in America, and for his midlife crisis, he bought a yellow Italian sports car. From Jane's perspective, she was two for two.

But something felt off to me. Because, although he had bought the Fiat, and when younger had gone to races at Watkins Glen — and for that matter was proud of the Oldsmobile he owned when he was older — he was not, in any real sense, a "car guy." He didn't fix cars. He didn't read about cars. He didn't comment on other cars on the road, except to complain about their drivers, especially when they tailgated him on Weldon Road. And the yellow Fiat was not a convertible, let alone an Austin-Healey.

Still, I enjoy Jane's mediumship, and was willing to work with her to see where the conversation would go. Yet at this moment, things got complicated. Another man in the audience, Warren, made it clear he wanted to be part of the discussion.

JANE: Okay. Sorry, Warren, you're —
WARREN: Possible as well.
JANE: You're a possible as well. Okay.… D'you know, I always wanna make a Fiat red. But [she laughs] I don't feel like it was red, was it? Would you understand it was… like, green? Or, like, a dark color?
MATT: Yellow.
JANE: Nah, that's not it. Would you understand a green, or a dark color?
WARREN: Absolutely.
JANE: Would you understand overseas, though?
WARREN: Absolutely.
JANE: Okey-dokey-pokey, we might be over here. Okay. And would you understand — but you don't understand it being an Austin-Healey? You understand it being a sports car.
WARREN: Um… very likely. Yes, a sports car. Not necessarily an Austin-Healey. I'm not real sure about that.
JANE: Okay, but it's a dark sports car.
Warren: Oh yeah.
JANE: Dark colored, like a bottle green, or a dark green, like a black color. I just see —
WARREN: … British racing green.

Here, then, was the real tipping point of the reading. Warren had stepped in, ready to take over. To sort things out, Jane described the car as "green, or a dark color," which seemed to rule me out, as I had already mentioned my dad's Fiat was yellow. Warren snapped this up, clarifying that the car he remembered was "British racing green." But he, too, was not sure what to do with the claim that it was an Austin-Healey.

Jane repeated the phrase "British racing green," and joked that she was going to take this as evidence, "'cause that's a bottle green as far as I'm concerned.… To be British racing green, it's gotta be a Jaguar." Although she said this with a laugh, Warren responded clinically: "Correct."

The mention of a Jaguar surprised me, for reasons I will explain soon. But at this point in the reading, I was happy to

have it go to Warren. I don't think of my dad as a car guy, and if Warren's father owned a green convertible, then the evidence seemed to be pointing in his direction.

Jane now indicated that she had given readings to Warren before, and knew some things about his family. But, she said, she felt this was not the spirit of someone she had brought through before.

Warren objected: "I think you have."

Jane, somewhat flummoxed ("Whoo! Okay.… Okay"), then asked if this man was Warren's father, and he responded, "Yeah."

Looking back, it is hard not to feel that Warren was pushing for the reading he wanted. Meanwhile, Jane was trying to stay in contact with the spirit world — to keep her mediumistic focus — while also dealing with her memories of previous interactions with Warren. "I just get newspapers," she said. "So, soon as I see your dad, I know I get newspapers."

Then came a hiccup. Warren said he didn't think it was Jane who brought through his father earlier, after all. It was another medium. And, as Spiritualism in Canberra is a cozy community, this other medium happened to be in the audience. This second medium affirmed that she was the one who had been in contact with the spirit of Warren's dad.

Jane processed this odd development. Then she returned to the reading with her usual confidence:

> JANE: … Okay. All right. Now… I just know that there's connections with newspapers. 'Cause he shows me newspapers, and I see newspaper articles, and I see, back in the time where there were black, white, and red newspapers. And I know that there are big newspapers. Now, I have to say he must have had something in the *New York Times*.
> WARREN: I'm not sure. Possibly.
> JANE: Can I ask that you go and research that? That — something of his work that he has done or written, whether he wrote to the *New York Times* — but I just see "New York Times" written above me. Would you also understand that he must have… travelled to New York?

Warren was not sure about the connection to the *New York Times,* although overall he remained persuaded by the reading. In response to Jane's question about travel to New York, he replied, "Absolutely."

Now I had a problem. Although the car thing was wobbly for me, New York was not. My dad worked in publishing for many years in New York. In fact, he met my mother when they both worked at Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Okay, he was in book publishing, not newspapers. But I could feel a spark now, as well as an irritation. Obviously, my father had a strong connection to New York.

Following Warren's "Absolutely," the conversation continued:

JANE: Absolutely. Okay. 'Cause I also know I have to talk about New York.… But I know that he travels further than just New York within America.
WARREN: Yep.
JANE: Okay. Now, I have to say, Warren, there must have been times for him where he didn't have time for the family. Because I very much feel him coming through now saying, "I want to talk about the *New York Times.* It's about time. Sometimes I didn't have *time* for my family." And I know, as he comes through now, I know that he is here for his own healing, in the sense that he is coming through to say: "Sorry, because I didn't have enough time with my children." And you would understand in particular, Warren, that… there were times where he just had no time for his children.
WARREN: Yep.
JANE: Not enough time, but no time for his children. And I know very much… the newspapers would have taken his time —
WARREN: Yep.
JANE: — away from his family. And I know he comes through to apologize for that time, because there were things that were just… too much business, too much in his head. And too important. And kind of — he's indicating, you know… he

> got trapped in the cycle of, of the desire, of the Jaguar, of the lifestyle, New York, all of that.

Now my ears were burning, my fingers itching, my mind racing: *this was starting to make sense.* While Warren and Jane developed the portrait of Warren's father as a man working with newspapers so intensely that he ignored his family, my magpie brain was plucking bits of what Jane had said and seeing that, like a motley nest, they were fitting together, after all.

I was, in short, becoming a bad audience member. I was too eager for the reading. Partly this was because it had been taken from me by another guy — and I realize there is a goofy pathos in two middle-aged men insisting that the charismatic blonde medium is talking with their dead father and not the other guy's dead father. I didn't say or do anything to disrupt the reading, but in my head and heart I was feeling frustrated because Jane had now said enough for me to put together compelling stories.

The first story: In his final years, my father apologized for not having had the announcement of my wife's and my wedding published in the *New York Times.* He had intended to do it, but had been too slow to act, and by the time he contacted the newspaper the deadline had passed. The second story: My father had bought my mother a toy Jaguar, like a Matchbox car — bright yellow, like the Fiat. He had joked that this was the only Jaguar he could afford to buy her. When Jane mentioned a Jaguar, I saw the toy gift in my mind's eye.

At the beginning of this book, I mentioned how when I began to attend Spiritualist services, I was not hoping to communicate with my father. I did not want or expect him to show up, because I accepted that he had lived his life, and was now gone. But in this moment, he was alive again. He was alive through the *New York Times* and the Jaguar, and the stories these objects called up in my memory.

Looking back at the transcript now, I regain a sense of balance. If my father was wealthy in anything, it was in time for his family. So Jane's insistence — and Warren's agreement — that this man had no time for his family would seem to show defini-

tively that if Jane was bringing through the spirit of anyone, it was more likely Warren's father than mine. But I can't forget the emotional pull of that day. It was the feeling that you are hearing things meant just for you, things only you could have known: stories that aren't actually stories, but fragments, moments, things you can put back together.

* * *

The other time I was an especially bad audience member, it was in an entirely different way. The reading was not for me, but, strangely, I seemed to be the one person in the room who could connect things up. Yet I held back.

It was at a service in December 2018, and I had brought my mother-in-law. Joan is now in her eighties, and still has propulsive energy. She is also devoted to her family and intellectually curious, which makes her a great person to invite to Spiritualist events. (This was her second CSA service, and she had also had a private reading with Lynette Ivory at my suggestion.) I had intended to sit next to Joan during the service, but it turned out I needed to run the A/V system and she needed to sit in the front row to be able to hear the day's medium, Norman Ivory, properly. So there was a physical distance between us. This didn't bother me at first, as I figured I would just chat with her after the service to see what she thought.

But then Norman gave Joan an extraordinary reading. At least it sounded extraordinary to my ears. He had gone directly to her. That is, he identified her as the audience member with whom a person in the spirit world wanted to communicate, and it was now up to her to say whether or not she recognized what he described.

I did not make an audio recording of that service, but afterward I wrote in my fieldnotes:

> It was a lady seen polishing a table to high gloss. She had a partner, but the rest of her family situation was not clear. Her father had been an infantryman killed in action. The name

> "Aunt Stephanie" was mentioned.… Joan said she didn't recognize anyone. Norman passed along a message, holding his hands out and saying that the woman in [the spirit world] was saying Joan had been generous to her, and generous to other people, and would be rewarded for it.

As Norman was going through these details, and Joan was politely saying she did not recognize the person, I found myself aching to speak up. Everything he said made sense. But I stayed mute, wondering: Can I step in? Should I step in? What should I do?

The story I knew was that Joan's mother lived to be 103 years old. In her last years, she had required a live-in housekeeper. The one she hired, a woman named Stella, had been married, but her husband was not often around. There was a delicious bit of improbable scandal: Stella claimed to have had an affair with Elvis Presley when she was young. And she had gotten pregnant!

So as Norman was speaking, here is what I was hearing: The woman was polishing a table. (Makes sense for a housekeeper.) She had a partner, but an otherwise vague family situation. (This sounded accurate.) Her father was a soldier killed in action. (Not sure, but Stella grew up in Germany, where she met Elvis when he was in the army.) The name "Stephanie" is close to "Stella," although apparently the person in the spirit world was not identifying herself as Stephanie. Joan had been generous to this person. (Yes, Stella was well paid.)[6]

I was unsure why Joan was not responding. I suspected it was because she is so devoted to her parents' memory that any woman in the spirit world would need to be her mother, not her mother's housekeeper. But I didn't really know. I strained forward in my chair, wondering what to do, and doing nothing.

When the service ended shortly afterwards, I bounded over to Joan.

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6 I have chosen "Stephanie" and "Stella" as pseudonyms because the real names have the same number of syllables and also begin with the same three letters.

That woman Norman was talking about, I asked — doesn't that sound like Stella?

Joan, electric as always: Oh, yes, it does! You're right! She hastened to tell Norman and Lynette.

I, too, told Norman that his reading had made sense to me. I was now the classic bad audience member, saying after the fact: You were right. Sorry not to say anything while you were struggling in front of the whole audience! I asked if it would have been acceptable for me to pipe up during the reading even though it wasn't for me, and was politely told that yes, that would have been fine.

As odd or selfish as this might sound, I remember feeling elated. I had heard things the right way. When Norman gave the description of this woman, I knew someone who fit the profile remarkably well, and each bit of evidence seemed to confirm the one before it. Heard from the right angle, it made harmonic sense.

Home again after the service, I told my wife about the reading, and she asked an obvious question: Wasn't Stella still alive?

* * *

Before a service In August 2017, I was chatting with an older member of the congregation who had moved to a warmer part of Australia but was now back in Canberra for a medical appointment. She knew the CSA and its personalities well, and offered a funny comment on the group and its history. She asked, you know how an onion has so many layers? Yes, I said. Well, she explained, the CSA is like six onions in one.

Six onions in one — the kind of thing that, when you peel it apart, just keeps peeling, all complexity and bite. She meant the comment in terms of the CSA as a human institution — people, politics — but it's also a good description of being an audience member at a mediumship demonstration.

Being a good audience member means letting the layers peel away and not expecting any core. First, obviously, you have to be open to the idea that communication with dead people is

possible. If so, then you need to be willing to hear from them through a medium, and even invite them to come and chat. But you also need to listen to the medium with critical sensibility. Or, to put it more plainly, you need to be willing to say: No, that's not my father.

In becoming an audience member, you get layered in stories. There are stories about past readings, as when Debby recalled the New Zealand medium who thought she was bored but brought through her grandmother's spirit anyway. There are stories that live only in audience members' memories, but are suggested anew as listeners rearrange the bits of information the medium has offered. Indeed, mediums sometimes tell audience members to continue the process begun during the reading, as when Jane told Warren, regarding his father and the *New York Times,* "Can I ask that you go and research that?" What she was saying, in essence, was: there's your story. You need to go and discover it, confirm it, and complete it.

Many stories cannot be resolved. Or, in the case of my mother-in-law's reading, they could probably be resolved, but they trail off instead. I looked Stella up on Google, expecting it would be fruitless. How could I find information on an obscure housekeeper who had lived most of her life before Internet saturation? Yet I was spectacularly wrong. She was, it turned out, famous as one of several women said to have had a love child with Elvis. Thanks to journalistic luminaries such as the *National Enquirer* and *Hollywood News Daily,* she was easy to locate online. But none of the sites included an obituary, so it was not clear to me whether or not Stella was still alive.

I didn't pursue it, because what I took from the reading was not a desire for external validation, but the intensity of the moment itself: recognizing enough of a character, her personality and actions, to sense a story coming together through the work of a medium. It was a story I already knew, and a story which the medium could not have known. He offered bits of it, fragments to make whole.

My lack of interest in validation might frustrate some readers, because there is no getting around the fact that Spiritual-

ism's central claim — we speak with the dead, because they are not really dead — is something that committed insiders take as firmly established and committed outsiders take as easily disproven. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, this book is meant as a quiet analytical engagement rather than a shout for either endorsement or debunking. In the next two chapters, however, I do address the matter of effective and ineffective mediumship. Even in a small society like the Canberra Spiritualist Association, one meets mediums with a remarkable range of styles and abilities. If one suspends judgments of the truth of mediums' claims, then how can one distinguish a good reading from a bad one?

CHAPTER 4

Mother's Day

Skilled mediums share several qualities. One is confidence. There are several ways to express confidence, such as speaking with deliberate authority. For example, don't ask audience members whether the details offered so far make sense, but ask, "Who am I with?" — indicating that someone in the audience is definitely the correct recipient. Another is to persist. When the room is silent, or an audience member responds with a string of "no's," don't give up. When you feel you are really in touch with the spirit world, you will be able to work effectively.

Another feature of successful mediumship is the ability to suggest the sense of a story. By describing what a deceased person was like, the medium prompts audience members to recall their loved ones and tales from their lives. Later, mediums tell stories about memorable readings, whether happy successes like when Lynette Ivory saw a yellow daffodil, or moments of frustration, like when Sarah Jeffery described a man with a burned face and his own daughter did not recognize him.

A third feature is flexibility — the ability to think laterally and stretch symbols just far enough. Beginning with a dark-colored Austin-Healey roadster, as Jane Hall did when reading for myself and Warren, she was able to propose that it might be another car, but it needed to be a convertible. My yellow Fiat fell away and Warren's "British racing green" Jaguar moved into

position. Mediums think nimbly this way because it is understood that people in the spirit world do not communicate *too* directly with us.

A fourth feature of successful mediumship is a sense of humor. This might seem counterintuitive, because popular images of communication with the dead include things like séances and Ouija boards. Séances are old-fashioned and reverential, if off-kilter, affairs: sitting around the dining room table in darkness, waiting for grandpa to materialize with a whoosh and a moan. Ouija boards are just spooky. But Spiritualist mediums avoid these clichés as they cultivate a light tone. They use plain language in plain rooms. Making people laugh in the face of death, loss, and grief is something skilled mediums are especially good at, enhancing a reading's emotional completeness and resonance.

When Lynn Probert came to Canberra in March 2017, she gave a thrilling public demonstration. As I described in Chapter 2, she is a well-known British medium who works internationally and teaches at the Arthur Findlay College, the training center of the Spiritualists' National Union. Before her visit, I had asked Norman Ivory, president of the Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA) at the time, if I might be allowed to record her public demonstration. He asked her on my behalf, and she agreed, although as I was setting up my recorder that night, she mentioned that this kind of thing would not be allowed where she came from.

Lynn gave six readings in a demonstration that lasted an hour and a half, with a twenty-minute break between the first three readings and the last three. Around forty people attended, paying fifty dollars per ticket. As I described in Chapter 2, Lynn sparked a warm vibe in the room from the beginning of the evening. She started by explaining how mediums work ("Very much we move our mind… out of the way"), told the audience how to react ("I will need you to respond to me"), and explained that a sense of humor is vital ("Just 'cause someone's died in a physical sense, they haven't lost their humor and their ability to have fun with you").

Here, I will focus on her second reading of the night, which combined pathos, humor, persuasion, and assertion. As in the rest of this book, I am not posing the question of existential reality — whether spirits exist, and whether Lynn speaks with them. Rather, I am pointing out that in Spiritualist mediumship, as in any ritual form, some people do a better job than others. Lynn did a remarkable job. But what, exactly, did she do so well?

* * *

"Okay, I've got a younger male now," she begins. Then comes her initial description of a man in the spirit world:

> I know he's taller, he's slimmer. I feel he's got quite an edgy personality, and when I say "edgy," I don't mean naughty or horrible. I just know that there's a little bit of a swagger to him. But I know that I've got a kind young guy. I do feel that he would have passed quickly. I… get the sense with him, he was someone that looked quite serious, although he wasn't. I feel that there was a studiousness to him, so I know that he was an intelligent young man. But I do feel that he got a little bit lost within himself just a short time before he passes.
>
> Now, I feel that… he would have had a wide circle of people that he knew, but he was very particular about who he kept close to him, or who he allowed close to him. Now, I feel that there was a suddenness to his passing, and as I get that sense, I know he would have passed in an accident. So I know that I pass quickly, I pass in an accident, and I know this was not his fault, regardless of anything that may have been said.
>
> So, who would I be with?

Some of this description is generic. What young man is not "a little bit lost within himself" and closer to some friends than others? But the core of this persona is specific: It is a young man who died in an accident for which he was blamed. In response to the question "who would I be with?" several audience members' hands go up.

Lynn says again that the man died in an accident. Now she clarifies, "he passes instantly," and she adds extra information: "I also feel that he would have a friend… that passed either in a very similar manner to him or within a short space of time to him." This statement winnows down the possible recipients to one person in the audience, a woman I will call Maura.

"Okay," Lynn says to Maura. "May I work with you?"

"Yes," she replies.

"Good," Lynn jokes. "I'd be really stuck if you said no." The audience laughs.

Maura proves herself a good comic foil, replying, "I just wasted fifty bucks." The audience laughs again.

Lynn says wryly, "That's a first," and the audience laughs one more time. Following this exchange, Lynn now begins to work with Maura to develop the sense of this man's character and presence.

LYNN: Okay, but I also know that would have been his humor. Do you understand that? Because I just feel like he'd go, "What are you doing here anyway?" 'Cause I don't feel that he's someone that would have been involved in this, or would have been open-minded to it. He would have said it's a load of rubbish. And now he's got to eat humble pie. Because I know that he's been very active around you since he's passed, to let you know that he's still very much a part of your life. You would understand this.

MAURA: That's it.

LYNN: I do feel, too, there was still that innocence to him. 'Cause I still want to say — I want to call him a boy, even though I know he's not. 'Cause I know I've just got that innocence and that naivety. He's not streetwise. Does that make sense?

MAURA: Mm hm.

LYNN: He would come across as he was, because he wanted to be seen that way. But I don't feel that that was his natural manner. Okay? Now, I do feel that he had a great sense of humor. But it was very dry, it was very quick, and it was very

witty. And I know that if you said something to him, he'd very quickly come back with a remark. And you would become a volley of—
MAURA: Yes.
LYNN: —tennis, almost, between the two of you. Okay?

Here, Lynn's comic flair flowers: she is teasing the spirit of the dead man by suggesting that he would have teased his mother for attending a Spiritualist meeting. He was a funny guy, and now the joke's on him, because he's here with us now—proving what he never would have believed while he was alive. Maura is clearly engaged by Lynn's words, and responds with a string of affirmations: "That's it," "Mm hm," "Yes."

The medium continues:

LYNN: I know that you would have fitted under his arm. Does that make sense to you? [Maura's response is not audible.] 'Cause I feel that seems important to do that to you. I want to get you in a hug. I'm not going to literally come and do it to you—
MAURA: No.
LYNN: —don't worry.
MAURA: That's OK.
LYNN: But I know that that's the kind of thing. 'Cause I feel he wants to kiss you on the top of your head—
MAURA: Uh huh.
LYNN: —and I know that's because of how he feels towards you. Do you understand?
MAURA: Mm hm.
LYNN: But I know he wasn't able to verbalize it so easily when he was here. He would do it by showing you, and doing things for you, but you would have to pester him…. Does—
MAURA: Yeah….
LYNN: —that make sense?
MAURA: So true.
LYNN: And particularly keeping his room tidy seems to be an important thing to talk about as well, because it wasn't. [Lynn

laughs.] Okay. Now, I do feel as well — think he's putting the word "Mum" across your head. Okay, you understand that?
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: So, yes. You're mum.[1]

This part of the reading begins in the pleasant, almost bantering style established from the beginning. Lynn assures Maura she's not really going to come over and grab her in a hug, and jokes about the significance of a clean room, because this young man had trouble keeping one. But then she offers something new.

Until this moment, when referring to her sense of the man's spirit, Lynn has almost exclusively used the verbs "feel" and "know." She has been building an intuitive sense of what he is like and how he died, and she uses these two verbs again and again. Now, however, she has an actual vision: she sees the word "Mum" displayed on Maura's forehead. (She uses the words "think" and "feel" in saying this, but it is clear from her description that she now has a visual impression of the word on Maura's body.) And Maura confirms that yes, she is the mother of this young man.

So it is established for the audience: Lynn is in touch with the spirit of a young man who died, connecting him with his mother. This scenario, the tragedy of a parent losing a child, is what drove me away from Spiritualism almost ten years earlier, when a medium in Melbourne spoke cheerfully about her toddler's death from cancer. But something's different now, and it's not only the passage of time. I'm still horrified at the idea of young people dying. In Melbourne, I felt I had been brought to the edge of a pit of despair by a reckless if well-meaning tour guide (*Lean in for a closer look!*). But now, in Canberra, with Lynn Probert demonstrating her mediumship, I feel like I'm being pulled back from the edge by — improbably

1 I am eliminating a brief stretch of dialogue after this, in which Maura was briefly confused, thinking Lynn was referring to Maura's mother. Several audience members piped up at this moment, and Lynn clarified that she meant Maura, joking, "Sorry. It's my English, it's not so good."

enough — something like jealousy: *Wow, this woman is getting a great reading!* Lynn's sympathy, combined with her lightness of touch and sureness of method, creates a sense of calm and safety that is encouraging, even as the event we are all being brought toward in a suggested narrative, a fatal accident, could not be more shocking or depressing.

* * *

In watching and listening to mediums, and going over transcripts of their readings, I often find it hard not to fall into circular reasoning. Who is an effective medium? Someone like Lynn. Why is she effective? Because audience members agree she is doing a good job. Why do they agree on this? Because she is an effective medium. To break the circularity, obviously, the question that needs answering is: what *specifically* does an effective medium do that an ineffective one does not? And the answer, unfortunately, is never straightforward, and depends as much on the audience as on the medium.

Confidence, yes: Lynn is supremely confident. But confident mediums can give bad readings, as I describe in Chapter 5. Persistence, yes: But as you will see, Lynn gets so many details right the first time around — right enough to convince Maura — that her persistence does not mean scaling a wall of "no's," but presenting more and richer information. A sense of humor: Yes, clearly, although theorizing humor is famously a dead end. What seems to matter for Lynn's humor is that it is balanced carefully with respect for everyone in the room, including the grieving mother and the spirit of her late son. She moves deftly between jokes which lighten the mood and poignant messages of love.

Again, I am only describing her effectiveness, not really explaining it. If anything sets this reading apart from many others, it is the sense of a story which Lynn suggests. She sketches a character, a young man at the heart of a tragedy. Although she cannot tell the story in detail, she can gesture toward it, and let Maura and the rest of the audience tell themselves how it goes.

As the reading continues, Lynn says, "I know I want to get you in a hug. And he just gives me that feeling of, 'It's my mum,' and — ."

Maura says "Yeah," and the medium continues, "that's why I saw it just written across your head there quite easily." She tells Maura to look for a rainbow, which might be an actual rainbow or a picture of one. When she sees it, she will know it's a sign from her son.

LYNN: Now, I do feel he did have those periods where he would become quite introverted. And I know that you couldn't always reach him emotionally. Do you understand that?
MAURA: That's true.
LYNN: And I feel that it was a struggle sometimes to understand where he was coming from, or where he was going, so to speak. But I still feel that around his accident there were a lot of question marks. Would that make sense to you?
MAURA: There were, yeah.
LYNN: 'Cause I feel that either he wasn't somewhere that was so familiar to him, or his diary had changed…. He wasn't meant to be where he was at that time —
MAURA: Yeah, he wasn't.
LYNN: — his plans changed.
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: And that's why there was — again, that was just one of the many questions: Why was he there at that moment, at that time?
MAURA: Mm hm.
LYNN: But I know that he wasn't the cause of this accident. You understand?
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: But I still feel that there may have been things that had been said or presumed in that way. 'Cause he wants to say, "Mum, thanks for being strong and standing my corner, and fighting for what you believed in. And that's me." Does that make sense to you? Okay.

In this remarkable passage, Lynn has begun to build a more complex sense of the young man and the meaning of his death. He was introverted at times. He could have trouble communicating. And something went wrong on the night he died — something unusual, a change in plans or some kind of mistake, something which put him in the wrong place at the wrong time. Having had trouble communicating while alive, he is now communicating fluently, and thanking his mother for doing the hard work of speaking up for him after the accident. She stuck up for him, correcting the misinformation other people were spreading. The accident was not his fault.

Here, Lynn is weaving together two strands as she develops the sense of a story. First is the universal question of meaning: *Why was he there at that moment, at that time?* As for anyone's life or death, the question can be answered in two main ways, with reference to either proximate or ultimate causality. Proximately, he was there at that time because of a mistake. His plans had changed, or perhaps he got lost. Normally, he would not have been there, and the mistake led to the fatal accident. But ultimately, he was there because it was his fate. In a deep sense, he was supposed to be there. Fate is a complicated topic in Spiritualism, and I will hold off discussing it until Chapter 6. But what Lynn does here, notably, is link the proximate reason — the mistake — to a moral reason rather than an ultimate one. She is saying: Because there was a mistake, people want to assign blame, and they blame your son, but he was not at fault. The hinted-at story becomes complete not through a theological explanation ("God said it was his time to go"), but rather through a moral affirmation: In life and death, he was good. An emotional loop is closed in catharsis. Maura's son died, but he is still alive, here and now; everyone said the accident was his fault, but it was not. He confirms his innocence from the spirit world and thanks his mother for affirming it to others. Here is an emotional groundswell, with loss, promise, and thanks rolling into each other.

* * *

"Now, I know that you've still got an item of his clothing," Lynn continues. "But there's something that you hold to your face, or you did do when he passed, because I know it's something that's soft. 'Cause I feel it's like a tee shirt, or a top, and I know it's still got the smell of him on it. Does that make sense to you?" Maura's response is inaudible, but seems to be positive.

The reading continues:

LYNN: Why did you keep his dirty — you call 'em sneakers, do you? Trainers, we call 'em trainers —
MAURA: I kept everything.
LYNN: Okay. And it's like, "Why keep those, mum? They're dirty." 'Cause if anything got dirty like that, rather than clean them, he'd throw them away and buy a new pair.
MAURA: He — definitely. Definitely. That's true.
LYNN: 'Cause I — and I know they've all got to be lined up in a certain way. And, and the thing about different color laces, I don't know what's going on there. But, I just know that he's aware of all of those things. Now, there must have been something that was done to commemorate him in some way. Because I feel like there was a memorial, or there was something to mark his passing in terms of a celebration of his life. Do you understand this? 'Cause I'm seeing a big screen with his face on it, and I'm trying to understand what he's showing me. Would there have been something done from where his school friends were concerned?
MAURA: They probably did. They were very good to us….
LYNN: Okay. Because, well, it just feels like the community come together. And I just get a sense that there's been something done to commemorate him, or in his name and honor. Would that make sense to you?
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: Because I feel that not only is he touched, he's so surprised that they've all done this. Because I don't feel it was just a shock — obviously a huge, immense shock to you as a family — but it extended more than that. It became an effect to the community, or the surrounding area in particular.

> Okay. Now, I spoke about a lock here, but I got to talk to you about keys, okay? Because I don't know if someone snapped a key just recently. Would you know of this? [Maura's answer is inaudible, but seems to be no.] Okay. Well, I do know that there is a key that either is very supple and —
> MAURA: All right.
> LYNN: — is it gonna snap, so you need to check your keys —
> Maura: Yes.
> LYNN: — but I also feel that there's something about your keys moving. So, you put your keys down, you can't find them. Or you put them in one place —
> MAURA: Oh, just tonight!
> LYNN: Right, okay.
> MAURA: We just couldn't find the keys tonight before we came.
> LYNN: Okay, okay. [The audience laughs.] Well, I know he wants to talk about that, or he wants to draw his attention to that — your attention. But I also know that he sort of takes a little bit of responsibility for that, too. 'Cause I feel, if he can do as much as he can to let you know he's there — he's the type — and again, he's just put the thought in my mind: If I could jump out of a cupboard and scare you, I would.
> EITHER MAURA OR HER DAUGHTER: Oh, dear. [The audience laughs.]
> LYNN: Obviously, that would be a very hard thing for him to do, but ultimately that would be his aim and goal. [The audience laughs.] You would understand that.

Here, Lynn hints at another story: The community came together to commemorate the young man's life. They showed his face on a screen. Maura does not respond strongly to this description, however, and simply allows, "They probably did." The details lay in place for the moment, undeveloped.

The striking moments in this part of the reading are the funny details of the young man's character. He was fastidious, lining up his sneakers and organizing their colored laces, and now he is dismayed that his sentimental mother won't throw out an old,

dirty pair. He pranks his mother by moving her car keys — he did it just this evening, in fact. And, in a delicious sendup of campy horror, he would love to play the part of a really ghosty ghost by jumping out of a closet to terrify his mother. But, Lynn adds drily, "that would be a very hard thing for him to do."

Following this streak of humor, Lynn returns to the poignancy of memory, and the young man's care for his living relatives:

LYNN: Now, I know that you put flowers beside a photograph of him.
MAURA: I just, just —
LYNN: Just tonight.
MAURA: This last week….
LYNN: Okay. Because I know he wants to say "thank you" for the flowers that you placed beside his photograph. And you light a candle there as well. 'Cause it's like he's got his little space in your room —
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: — that is just dedicated to him. And there's a little prayer card there as well, isn't there? Or there's a card with a verse on it.
MAURA: Not there, but I do have —
LYNN: But you've got one —
MAURA: — yes.
LYNN: — okay. And I also know there's a picture of him on your phone as well. [She addresses a woman next to Maura] Are you sister?
MAURA'S DAUGHTER: I'm his sister, yes.
LYNN: Yes, sister. Okay. Because I needed to move my attention to you. But I know that his picture would be on both of your phones, okay? I know he wants to talk about a photograph that you have of him when he's little, and he's got all this chocolate smeared 'round his face. Would you understand that?
MAURA: That's actually of his brother.

LYNN: Of his brother, okay. So that's his way of saying: Don't miss him out, don't miss her out. He's bringin' me all the things to help me move through the family. But I also feel, too, that — and I don't know if it's brother, or someone else in the family, that still struggles to talk about him. Yes? Okay. Because, again he brings me that feeling of wanting to bring healing in that space. Because he wants it to become more of a space where you can all talk and laugh about him. It's okay to cry about him. But he wants you to laugh about him more. 'Cause he was funny, and he did have his quirky ways, but he doesn't want it to be — I don't know, there's something where his brother's concerned. Would it make sense that his brother at the moment is going through a little bit of — I don't know, going into himself, like he did? And it's like he doesn't want him to make the same mistake of feeling like he can't resolve things, or that it's not fixable.
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: Yeah?
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: Because that seems important: "Come on. If you can't do it for yourself, do it for me." So, he wants his brother to know that he's aware of how he's feeling. But more importantly, that he wants him to pull his socks up.… Just get on with it. Just get on with living life, yeah, but believing in himself — that seems to be very important. And what other people think of you is none of your business.
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: So it's like, "Come on, get on with it, and let's do it together." So, I know that that's important.

Lynn begins this part of the reading by describing what she sees: flowers next to a photograph, a prayer card. Maura recognizes them. Although this is a typical Spiritualist dialogue, with the medium providing details as evidence and the audience member affirming them, it is noteworthy that Lynn is still doing this long after Maura has accepted that her deceased son is communicating with them. This adding-up of confirmed detail is

another dimension of Lynn's skills as a medium: sheer volume. Ten correct details are better than five, and twenty are better than ten, because persuasion depends on evidence, and evidence builds up.

But Lynn also starts doing something new here, expanding the web of relations and beginning to develop another message the young man wants to deliver. First she brings Maura's daughter into the dialogue, identifying her as the sister of the deceased young man. Next, she happens to pull Maura's living son into the dialogue although he is not present in the room, because she describes a photograph of a kid with chocolate on his face which Maura recognizes. Lynn says the son in the spirit world is acknowledging everyone in the family, and wants them to remember him with laughter as well as tears, because "he *was* funny." But then she focuses on the living son, suggesting he is in a difficult situation. He is withdrawing, and doesn't know how to go on — presumably, although she does not say so, partly because of his brother's death. Lynn emphasizes that the deceased young man is exhorting his brother, encouraging him: "Come on, get on with it, and let's do it together."

The reading is becoming a family affair. At least four members of Maura's family are now involved: Maura, the daughter who came with her tonight, the son at home, and the son in the spirit world. The key messages being developed are the son's gratitude to his mother and the worrisome fact that his brother is suffering. The young man wants his brother to move beyond suffering, to embrace the life he still has in the physical world.

* * *

The reading is almost two-thirds finished. There is no countdown clock in mediumship, obviously. But good readings take on a form, weight, and direction that leads toward completion. Lynn has already succeeded in this reading by giving Maura details she recognizes from her son's life. She has also begun to deliver his messages of love and care for his family members.

Now, coming toward the end, she continues to braid expressions of loss and memory with colorful threads of humor.

LYNN: I do feel, though, that he wants to say — now, you've kept a Mother's Day card from him, haven't you?
Maura: Yeah.
LYNN: And Mother's Day is a different time of year here to what it is in the UK. But he wants you to make sure that you get that card out. Put it out, pride of place, this year.
MAURA: He was born on Mother's Day.
LYNN: He was born on Mother's Day. Okay. I wish I'd told you that. [The audience laughs.]
MAURA: But that's why it's special.
LYNN: Okay.
MAURA: He was born on Mother's Day.
LYNN: Okay. Well… I did feel it was special. But please put that card out. Because I know that every Mother's Day that comes along — I mean obviously, even harder because he was born on that day — but every day, you feel to yourself, "I haven't got a card from him this year." And so he knows that that's something that saddens you at that time of year. So, he wants to make sure that you put it out, so that you can see that there's something from him. And just know that when you do it, that you're sending his love in exactly the same way. He wouldn't have written lots of words in there. He just would have written "To Mum, from Me."
MAURA: Yes. [The audience laughs.]
LYNN: Yeah, that's it. But he would have chosen the card that said it for him. And I know that card does. And I feel that's why he wants to draw attention to it, because it's important to him… for you to read those words again, all right? Now… I've got my lenses in, I can't see very well [she gives a small laugh], that's really bad, isn't it? [The audience laughs.] Well, I can see you… but I can't see what you've got 'round your neck. But I am very drawn to what's 'round your neck, but — he's showing me a butterfly. And I know that that would be very significant as well. And would it make sense that there's a

tattoo as well that he wants to talk about? Is this with both of you, though?

MAURA'S DAUGHTER: We both have tattoos of butterflies.

MAURA: You both — okay. Because as I said it to you, he went, "And her." [The audience laughs.] So — but one of you has talked about getting another one done. [One of the women says, "Yes."] Is that you? Okay. He knows. That's it — you've been busted. So, I know that he's aware of all these things, and they please him. One of you really struggled with the pain, and he found that hilarious. Does that make sense to you?

MAURA: Actually, it was his brother. His brother had tattoos of an eagle on his ribcage.

LYNN: Ah, okay. [Several voices speak; Lynn continues.] But… he had to stop, he had to stop halfway through, or he had to stop and go back.

MAURA: Yeah, he had to stop, take Panadol, and go back. [The audience laughs.]

LYNN: Well, tell him he knows. Tell him he knows. Because it's things like that that are gonna give his brother something to hold on to. But I know that it made him laugh in the way that he would have done that — any misfortune [Lynn gives a small laugh] when he was here. "But please know, mum, that I was only the person I was because of you. And I was only the person that I was because of how you made me strong. 'Cause I couldn't have done it on my own." You understand that?

This part of the reading begins with a poignant moment. Lynn mentions a Mother's Day card which persistently reminds Maura that her son is no longer here. Maura mentions that her son was born on Mother's Day, giving the symbol especially painful gravity. But Lynn, agile as always, now gets everyone to laugh by making fun of herself. She implies that a really good medium would have known this fact ("I wish I'd told you that"). This is both funny and extremely confident: *Sure, I've been correct about many things, but I should have given you even more.*

She continues to keep the mood light, making people laugh by joking that the young man did not write much on the card, and making fun of her own poor eyesight. I keep pointing out Lynn's humor because it is an essential feature of her skill as a medium, but, as should be clear, she is not a gabbling nightclub entertainer. She jokes to develop a fuller sense of what this event is fundamentally about. The humor is sometimes at her own expense, and when it is at the expense of the deceased young man, it is in the service of developing his portrait as funny. Indeed, humor is so essential to his character that he is teasing his brother about a painful tattoo as a way of giving his brother "something to hold on to." The brother had started getting an eagle tattoo on his ribcage, but had to pause and take painkillers during the process. The young man in the spirit world is making fun of his brother in order to cheer him up and give him hope. Lynn's humor lightens the mood of somber circumstance and vividly shows a young man who himself poked fun, laughed at misfortune, and would enjoy scaring his mother as a way of showing his love for her.

Now comes the final part of the reading. Even in these late moments, Lynn offers new details. And, crucially, she offers more suggestions of possible stories. This time, Maura takes her up on one of them.

LYNN: And I know that when he passed — and I know that when it came to saying goodbye to him — I know that there were a lot of people that came that he hadn't expected to, and that you hadn't expected to. But more importantly, you heard stories about the things he'd done for other people. And I know that he'd helped a lot of people in your community, and within his friends as well, that he'd never talked about. So there was a humbleness to him that showed his sensitivity. And I think if he was still here now, I feel that he would say he could make a good medium out of himself. Does that make sense? Because he did have that sensitivity and that awareness. And I think that was part of him that he was sort of struggling with to understand, or to accept, shall we say. But

please know — okay, just in the last couple of months, you must have had an experience where, just as you were waking up, you thought you saw him there.
MAURA: I did. It was — I was sleeping alone, and —
LYNN: Yeah.
MAURA: — I just had this awful feeling, like there was someone in the room —
LYNN: Yeah.
MAURA: — and I woke —
LYNN: I know that as you opened your eyes, it's like you saw him, and the minute you concentrated, it went. Okay. The image went. 'Cause I know that he draws close to you when you sleep. But I know you felt him sit on your bed. And I know you felt him lay on your bed as well. Does that make sense?
MAURA: Yeah.
LYNN: But I know that he shows himself to you. And he didn't mean to scare you. But I know he was just watching over you, the way that you always watched over him. So, please know that he will continue to do so. But please take his love, and — whose birthday is it around now?
MAURA'S DAUGHTER: My uncle's….
LYNN: Okay, 'cause he just wants to say happy birthday. Okay, so please, take his love and I say thank you so much for allowing me to work with you. [The audience applauds.]

A bit more than sixteen minutes after it began, the reading ends. Sixteen minutes is long for a single reading within a public demonstration, but there were no slack moments.

One of the stories Lynn begins to suggest is that many people attended the man's memorial service to show their appreciation for the help he had given them. The number of people surprised Maura, as well as the young man himself, watching from the spirit world. Lynn is suggesting a new story, one about the telling of stories, with people gathering in honor of the young man to talk about all the good he had done. He was good because he was sensitive, and because he was sensitive he would have

made an effective medium. This connection leads Lynn to suggest another story: Maura has actually seen her late son. Maura agrees. But, in taking up this narrative and beginning to tell it herself, she explains that it wasn't a pleasant experience: "I just had this awful feeling, like there was someone in the room." Earlier, Lynn had joked about how much the young man would like to scare his mother. Now, his mother says he actually did this. Lynn quickly acknowledges that this was a shock, and reassures Maura that he is only coming with love. Finally, she adds one more detail, a birthday, and Maura's daughter affirms that it is her uncle's.

* * *

As a sympathetic audience member with an academic interest in what was going on, I found the reading mesmerizing and cathartic. As soon as the service was over, I raced over to Maura to let her know I hoped to analyze her reading in my research project. She was very gracious about it.[2]

In this book, sticking closely to my experiences with the Canberra Spiritualist Association, it might seem odd to spend so much time discussing the work of a visiting medium from overseas. Indeed, many Australians are sensitive about "cultural cringe" — Australians thinking that everything from England

2 Maura received another reading that night. As she explained when I interviewed her a year later, her daughter was especially interested in this kind of thing, and had purchased the tickets for the evening's demonstration. Although Maura enjoyed seeing mediums — she had gone to Sydney to see John Edward, for example — she had not come that night expecting to receive a reading, let alone two. Her demeanor showed that she was not a "grabber" or "body snatcher," the kind of audience member who is too eager for a reading and poaches them from other recipients. Indeed, she mentioned that she had had readings from at least two Canberra mediums that did not ring true to her, so she had a degree of skepticism.

I had the sense that Lynn's readings were meaningful and uplifting for Maura. When I interviewed her, she did say that after a reading you feel a bit flat, as you realize once again that the deceased person is not physically here anymore.

must be better than it is Down Under. I did, of course, observe highly skilled Australian mediums. Lynn's demonstration stood out for several reasons nonetheless. She continually built up details throughout the reading, adding onto them even when many had already been accepted. She pulled off an adroit balancing act between evoking grief and prompting laughter. And perhaps most importantly, she suggested a web of stories — ones she could not tell in full but Maura could, and the rest of us could imaginatively follow. A fun-loving but somewhat troubled young man went driving one night. There had been a change in plans — a mixup. He was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be, and then, in the moment that can never be undone, he crashed. He died. People wanted to blame him for the accident. This was a natural reaction to such an untimely death. But he had been innocent, and his mother stood up for him. Tonight he came back to thank her. He also came to urge his brother onward, to let him know that he should follow a different road and move on with his own life.

I began this chapter by asking what makes mediumship succeed, and have offered Lynn's reading for Maura as an example. Now I will turn to the thornier question of what makes a reading fail. When a medium speaks with confidence, persists through moments of doubt and negative responses, adds a touch of humor, and suggests wider stories that can be spun from threads of evidence — when the medium does everything right — what could go wrong?

Plenty, it turns out.

CHAPTER 5

How Not to Speak with the Dead

In Chapter 2, I gave an example of failed mediumship. It was on the first night of Lynette and Norman Ivory's training course, and I was the one who failed. I steadied my nerves, quieted my mind, and declared my intention to be in touch with the spirit world. I stood up, faced the class, and saw the man from the Blue Öyster Cult album cover. According to the principles of mediumship, there was nothing inherently wrong with my vision. People in the spirit world might have shown me the image because I was familiar with it and it looked like someone who would be recognized by my classmates. But no one recognized him.

Because this was a training course, everyone had a difficult time now and then. The third week's session, I wrote in my notes, "was a notably off night, with I think no real recognition of any of the spirits making contact." In the ninth week, a student brought through a vivid character — a tanned, outdoorsy bloke — whom no one recognized. Another time when a student was in contact with a spirit nobody could "take," I asked Norman if random spirits ever showed up. He said yes. He explained that when mediums gather, they emit a kind of light which attracts people in the spirit world. Because the deceased have the same personalities they did while alive, and because it takes them a while to learn how the astral plane works, the spirit

of a naïve, curious, and recently deceased person might get confused and show up to a mediumship session even though they don't know anyone in the room.

Seasoned mediums sometimes struggle. At a Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA) service in October 2016, I wrote in my notes, the veteran medium "had one complete miss — no one ever identified the spirit, so she moved onto another. There was also considerable doubt (that is, not a strong identification) of another." At a July 2018 service, the same medium described someone's grandfather who had lived in the 1920s, was an engineer, and had an association with pine trees. The medium appealed to me twice, apparently hoping I would recognize this character, but I said no, I didn't. No one else in the audience did, either. So the medium said she would ask the spirit to move on.

In an October 2017 service, a medium I will call Jessica had similar difficulties. On this day only twelve people had shown up to the service, meaning the room's energy was not especially high.

> JESSICA: I have a gentleman.... I've got music going. He's appearing in his — he doesn't look like Elvis Presley, but he's that kind of dressed, and that kind of apparel. He has a black suit on. Shoes that are, like, his toes are back here, and they've got big pointy bits out the front… black and polished. He's got a white shirt on and a thin tie. Black tie. I almost, almost wanna say it's got [a] keyboard on it, but I don't think he's gone quite that far. He is a piano player; he was a piano player here. He *absolutely* adores music....
>
> He passed in his eighties. He's showing me himself sitting in a retirement home, as opposed to — not a village, but an actual retirement home. He's in a leather chair by a window, large window which has a garden outside. And he's got a leather — like a La-Z-Boy chair, but he's got his feet on the ground and he's tapping away with his right hand. So he's right-handed as well, I believe. So, he's tapping away on his knee.... It's a light tan, middle brown color, this La-Z-Boy, and he has a crocheted blanket, but it's over the back of the

> chair. It's like he's sort of leaning on it. It's not covering his knees or anything like that. And he says… "I'm not putting that on."… So, he doesn't see himself as quite the older gentleman he is.

Here was a sharp and memorable character. An old man who did not consider himself old. A flashy dresser. A passionate musician. Jessica asked if anyone recognized him, and no one responded. "Nope?" she said. "Okay. Let's see—." Then an audience member tried to help.

> WANDA: Jessica, I've worked a little bit in the aged care, disability area. That's all I've got. It might be someone—
> Jessica: Okay.
> WANDA: —in that time, but I can't place it at all.
> JESSICA: Okay, that is right. We'll see what else he's got to say. He's saying, "We're both going to be working for our money this afternoon." [She laughs.]… He is in Australia. I believe it is 'round New South Wales. He's showing me—I could see New South Wales on the map, as opposed to ACT [the Australian Capital Territory, where Canberra is]. So, he's come to say, "I know someone." So I'm just gonna ask him if someone knows him. I'm gonna get a better idea. [Short pause.] It's a girl, so one of you ladies knows him [Jessica indicates two women in the front row]…. He lived a happy life, a contented life. He wasn't—his wife, two boys, he had two boys. They weren't excessively wealthy, but they had enough to live on, and they were quite content with that. Is that bringing anything to you?
> ANNE: Nuh uh.
> JESSICA: Okay. And no one else? Okay. He passed around ten to fifteen years ago. He—when he was younger… he had black hair, and it was slicked back, Brylcreem, with Brylcreem…. So it's sort of slicked back. He said he never, never forgot a tune, and the music was exceptionally important. I don't appear to be with you, Wanda, sorry.

WANDA: No. No, it's all right, [inaudible]. Yeah. Sounds like an amazing person.
JESSICA: [Laughs.] He was happy. Okay. If no one else at this point's going to — and I can't get any more information… at the moment. So I'm just gonna thank him for coming, and bring someone else in. [Seven-second pause.] Okay. I've got a lady with me who's showing herself to be in her seventies.

Jessica did not do anything wrong. She gave bright and specific details. It was easy for me to visualize an elderly, colorfully dressed piano player with a youthful heart and gelled hair. The problem was I did not know any such man. No one else did, either. Jessica spoke confidently. She kept trying. Yet despite her proper technique and her enthusiasm, she and the audience could not do anything with this man in the spirit world.

Audience members at CSA services believe in the reality of the spirit world, and rocky performances do not call that belief into question. I never saw anyone challenge a medium's authenticity. Indeed, during Jessica's reading, Wanda was disappointed that it wasn't working out: "Sounds like an amazing person," she said.

* * *

The topic of belief is central to Spiritualist understandings of effective and ineffective mediumship. Knowing how belief works in mediumship requires clarifying the term's meanings and usefulness. On my academic home turf of anthropology, "belief" has been the topic of sharp criticism for several decades. Rodney Needham (1972) argued that belief was a distinctly Christian category. Two decades later, Talal Asad (1993, chapter 1) published a profound critique of a widely used anthropological definition of religion, arguing that it was flawed because it was based on a modern Christian understanding of belief. In recent years, it has become commonplace for scholars to assert

that, even if one wants to try to define religion, basing the definition on belief would be a mistake.[1]

Several scholars have suggested a productive way forward by pointing to two different meanings of "belief." In one sense, belief concerns propositions, statements offered as facts that can theoretically be proven or disproven. Did dinosaurs exist? I believe they did, because the fossil evidence is highly persuasive. This use of "belief" is open to ridicule, because I'm supposed to say I *know* dinosaurs existed, and using "belief" suggests I'm acknowledging a ludicrous counterargument. But insisting too loudly on the difference between belief and knowledge can lead in unproductive directions and close off the kind of consideration I am trying to offer here. I simply want to point out that one use of "belief" is to mark a position on the truth or falsity of a statement.

The second sense of "belief" concerns trust and commitment. Do you believe in freedom of the press? Although a respondent might spin this as a proposition ("There is no real freedom of the press as long as news media are driven primarily by a profit motive"), the question, as posed, is really about what position you commit yourself to. Do you think the press ought to have significant freedom to operate, or should private and public interests be allowed to constrain it?

These two meanings of belief are not exclusive. As Jean Pouillon (2016) observes, writing "$E=mc^2$" would be an expression of belief for most of us. We believe it is a factually true statement about energy and mass, but we believe this because we trust in Albert Einstein's authority—he knew a lot more about physics than we do. When talking about mediumship and its audiences, the distinction between belief as proposition and belief as commitment is crucial to keep in mind but easy to confuse.[2]

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1 See also Ruel (1982), Robbins (2007), and Rutherford (2009). The definition of religion critiqued by Asad was Geertz's (1973).

2 For a lively example of confusion during a research project caused by the conflation of belief as proposition and commitment, see Steedly (1993, 34–35).

The grounding claims of Spiritualism are that people survive physical death and can communicate with us from the spirit world, and that mediumship enables this communication. The purpose of a medium's demonstration is to prove that these claims are true (belief as proposition); the aim of mediumship is to "serve Spirit" (belief as commitment). "Serving Spirit" means communicating across planes of existence to enlighten humanity and lead us in spiritual progress. In short, mediums combine the two senses of "belief" in their work. What Spiritualists say is true about the world is meant to be proven in a medium's demonstration, and the demonstration shows commitment to a project that is spiritual, moral, intellectual, and interpersonal all at once.

Belief as proposition is safeguarded against failure in mediums' readings. When a person in the spirit world is not recognized, as in the case of the elderly piano player, Spiritualism's propositions are not thought to be disproven. People in the spirit world "speak" to mediums in many ways, and many things can go wrong in transmission. Perhaps the medium is having a low-energy day, struggling to do what would normally come easily to her. Perhaps she put her own interpretation on a sign instead of relaying it directly to the audience, causing confusion. Perhaps the medium did a good job and the right recipient in the audience was simply tuned out, inattentive. What is being tested in demonstrations is not the reality of the spirit world, but mediums' effectiveness in bringing forth recognizable signs and valuable messages from it. As long as mediums try their best, they cannot fail to serve Spirit.

* * *

So far, I have avoided the question of fraud. I have done so for two reasons. First, I never saw anything at CSA services that seemed fraudulent. The mediums and audience members all struck me as open and honest about what they felt they were doing. Everything was done in earnest — sometimes to a fault, as when mediums offered such specific details that it became

unlikely anyone would recognize the spirit. Mentioning a piano player might get a few people in the audience to raise their hands, but describing a piano player with big pointy shoes, gelled hair, and a dislike of his crocheted blanket is not fishing in the pond of generality. Second, the topic of fraud immediately puts the discussion of mediumship into the true/false meat grinder I am trying to avoid.

But the question of fraud does need to be posed, if only because Spiritualism has had a difficult history with it. Old-fashioned physical mediums were often caught faking their way to sensational results, as Ruth Brandon (1983) observed. Sometimes they were clumsy. One nineteenth-century medium, pretending to materialize as a spirit, got "her filmy robe caught on a nail and she was stuck on her knees" (102). At other times, they were exposed by audience members. When a medium named Rosina Showers was inside her "cabinet" — the small enclosure where physical mediums are supposed to build up spiritual energy — a spirit's face materialized in the gap between curtains parted at the top. The audience drew closer to see better, and the daughter of the household, in a moment of innocent curiosity, pulled the curtains wide open. There was "the very substantial body of Miss Showers standing on a chair and vainly clutching the curtains together. The spirit face was revealed to be undeniably attached to this body" (120). Sometimes critics intentionally exposed mediums as hoaxers. One medium who attended a rival's séance lit an especially bright match in the darkness, revealing his competition "dancing about the room like a fay," performing tricks (106). Whatever their intentions, when audience members grabbed at the gauzy figures of ghosts in darkened séance rooms, they often found them all too fleshly — and struggling mightily to get free (110).

Yet when mediums were caught cheating, sympathetic observers often argued that skepticism was the real problem: mediums could not perform properly in front of a disbelieving or hostile audience. Even eminent scientists could twist themselves into rhetorical knots to explain things that looked suspicious. For example, Alfred Russel Wallace once argued that

when a "spirit" hand was grabbed during a séance and turned out to be connected to the medium, this did not prove the medium was tricking anyone. It could mean, he suggested, "that if a form is seized which is really distinct from the medium, yet the result may be that the form and the medium will be forcibly brought together, and a false impression created that the form *was* the medium"—an astonishingly shaky bit of logic from a great scientist (Brandon 1983, 121). If some scientists were fooled, however, showmen and magicians were not. Both P.T. Barnum (1866) and Harry Houdini (1924) wrote books explaining the techniques of fraudulent mediums.

The terms "fraud" and "authenticity" might seem to stand in sharper contrast to each other than the terms discussed earlier in this chapter, "proposition" and "commitment." Yet in both cases, Spiritualist authors draw on the meanings of both to confirm each other. Some writers put fraud and authenticity into the same frame by suggesting that fraud only succeeds when it imitates an authentic possibility. "I have met fraud, both wilful and unconscious," acknowledged the British medium and longtime editor of *Psychic News,* Maurice Barbanell. "I think I can say that I have exposed more charlatans in this field than any other person." He attributed his discernment to having seen honest mediumship: "I have witnessed so many genuine phenomena that I was able to recognise the counterfeit. After all, the spurious is a copy of the real. Were there no genuine phenomena, there could be no simulations of them" (Barbanell 1959, 7; see also Ivory 2016b, 164–65).

In popular culture, the fake medium is a well-known character. Daniel Dunglas Home, reputed to be one of the few nineteenth-century physical mediums never caught in fraud, was lampooned by Robert Browning as "Mr. Sludge, the Medium." In Browning's poem, Sludge is caught cheating and begs not to be exposed. He suggests that a medium's audience is half to blame:

> The cheating's nursed
> Out of the lying, softly and surely spun

> To just your length, sir! I'd stop soon enough:
> But you're for progress. (Browning 1878, 200–201)

Just as memorably, Mark Twain satirized the mail-order medium James Vincent Mansfield in his memoir *Life on the Mississippi*. Customers sent Mansfield letters asking about deceased loved ones; Mansfield returned spirit-dictated replies, claiming he had not opened the envelopes. Twain, changing the medium's name to "Manchester," recalled meeting him in person years earlier. Manchester had offered Twain and his friends answers to their questions which were wrong or, worse yet, banal:

> *Question.* Where are you?
> *Answer.* In the spirit world.
> Q. Are you happy?
> A. Very happy. Perfectly happy.
> Q. How do you amuse yourself?
> A. Conversation with friends, and other spirits.
> Q. What else?
> A. Nothing else. (Twain 1883, 482)

The medium's description of the afterlife was so bland that one of the inquirers asked what crimes he could commit to avoid getting sent there.[3]

As Spiritualism moved from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, so did the literary skewering of fraudulent mediums. In her novel *Strong Poison* (1930), Dorothy Sayers has Lord Peter Wimsey send the spinster Kitty Climpson to a country house in search of a will which, he rightly suspects, will hold the clue to a murder. She learns that the nurse who cares for the house's owner is a Spiritualist, so she pretends to be a medium to win her confidence. Kitty even performs tricks to convince the nurse of her spiritual powers. She makes mysterious cracking sounds with a small box strapped to her knee. She tips a table with

3 I am drawing on the discussion of Twain's experiences, and his creative adaptation of them, in Kerr (1972, chapter 7).

stiff wire attached to her wrist. She rummages through photos to figure out the woman's family connections, which she then describes while faking a trance. The kindhearted Kitty feels guilty, but knows she is working to catch a criminal. She assures herself that audiences are always complicit in mediums' performances: "it didn't much matter what you said," she muses, "the other person was sure to help you out of it" (Sayers 1980, 223).

Her point — that audiences largely convince themselves — reflects the argument made by Lamar Keene in his sensationalist exposé *The Psychic Mafia* (1976). Keene, a medium who worked in Florida and Indiana, portrays himself and his fellow mediums as grifters. Although he can't stop crowing about what a talented magician he was, the book's dominant motif is Keene's contempt for his audience. People are so desperate to hear from the dead, he says again and again, that they will believe anything at all. Indeed, one medium — somehow even more disdainful of his clients than Keene is — lets him know that "the sitters didn't deserve even convincing fraud. The cheapest, silliest, most palpable fakery was more than good enough for them" (Keene 1976, 70).

With this popular history in mind, I gently asked questions about fraud now and then during my research. When I asked Lynette and Norman Ivory if they had seen dishonest mediums, they answered yes. But, Lynette said, "You can't go up to them and say, 'You're lying.'" You would need to be able to prove that they were lying. She recalled an early experience in Canberra, before she and Norman took leadership of the CSA, in which a man was clearly cheating. He chatted her up before the service, asking about details of her life. It turned out he was the medium for that day's service. While giving the demonstration, he repeated Lynette's information back to her as if he were receiving it from the spirit world.

"There is always an outcry about fraudulent mediums," the textbook for the CSA mediumship course acknowledges:

> Fraud cannot be stopped in any walk of life and so it is with mediums. There will always be those who want to take

> money from naive, uninformed and gullible people and so it is within [S]piritualism. Every effort is made to expose these fraudulent mediums, but it is not possible to stamp it out. The responsibility lies with the person requiring a sitting [that is, the medium's client] to ensure that the person they are going to see is a bona fide medium with a solid reputation. Spiritualists have always condemned fraud and always will. (Ivory and Ivory 2017, 51–52)

* * *

When Jessica struggled to get audience members to "take" the description of the piano player with gelled hair, the reading ended and she moved on to a new person in the spirit world, a lady in her seventies or eighties with curly grey hair. The difficulty Jessica had with the piano player is a somewhat rare example, however. Not many readings during Sunday services peter out this way. What happens more often is a reading pockmarked with "no's" and silence — a difficult conversation in which the medium keeps pressing on, tentatively but with determination, and reaches a nebulous agreement with audience members, not admitting failure but not delivering a strong performance, either.

Norman has had long experience as a medium and has given many successful readings. One day in November 2017, however, he had a notably difficult one. The man in the audience he read for, Jack, is generous and soft-spoken. But as the reading makes clear, Jack is strictly committed to high standards of evidence, as is Norman. On this day, the evidence was mostly judged by Jack not to be strong enough.

> NORMAN: I'm not seeing this person at the moment, but I'm feeling a very motherly feeling. So it seems to me that I'm getting a mother or a grandmother. I'm not seeing — and I don't know who it is yet — but it's someone in that sort of vibration that's coming to you. It's a very motherly feeling, a lot of love and warmth. [Twelve-second pause.] Now, I'm not

sure whether it's that lady who may have been — I'm seeing someone who liked playing cards, because I'm seeing someone showing me a hand of cards. Mostly red cards, hearts or diamonds.
JACK: Got you.
NORMAN: [Ten-second pause.] I don't know whether… tell me if this is correct: She says you used to play cards a fair bit, but you don't now.
JACK: No.

In context, it was clear that Jack's "No" meant he did not play cards in the past. He was not accepting the description yet.

NORMAN: And in that case it must be someone else. Someone played a lot of cards, but doesn't — didn't lately, or didn't at the end of their life. Something like that.
JACK: I wouldn't know.
NORMAN: You don't know. Right, okay. Well, they're not backing up.

Norman, a resilient medium, indicates that the person in Spirit is resilient, too: "they're not backing up." This person wants to be acknowledged, and Norman needs to keep working. He offers more details as he senses them. After an eight-second pause, he says:

NORMAN: Now she's changing the scene completely, and I'm seeing a kitchen situation. And I'm seeing a big pot, and stirring this pot. And it's got some sort of stew or vegetables, or things like that in it. And, and meat. And it's stirring all of this. And this was something that she did quite often, apparently.

In the audio recording, Jack's answer is not clear. It sounds like he says he doesn't remember, meaning he can't identify this image as evidence. Whatever Jack's precise words, Norman seeks clarification:

NORMAN: Now, this is a few years ago.
JACK: Mm.
NORMAN: You don't remember that, either?
JACK: No.
NORMAN: Ah, okay.
JACK: No memory of it.
NORMAN: Not something you remember.
JACK: No.
NORMAN: No. Okay.

Norman now pauses for fifteen seconds, still working mentally with the person in the spirit world, trying to get evidence Jack will recognize. "Now I'm feeling something," he eventually says.

NORMAN: You come from Charlottetown, don't you?
JACK: Moncton. It's just across the water.[4]
NORMAN: Ah, right, so it's — that, for me [laughs]… it's the same, you know? I've never been there. Well, I've flown through, and — . This lady says she wasn't as close in. She was a bit away from where you lived, as though she wasn't there, she was a bit further away somewhere.
JACK: Depending on who you're talking about, one would have no experience in that part of the world, and the other one was actually living with us.

Jack's voice is soft and his tone neutral, but the substance of his response is blunt. He does not know who this woman could be. Neither of the two possibilities he has in mind lived "a bit away": One lived in his house, and the other was never nearby. Norman says "Uh huh, okay," and pauses again. After fourteen seconds, he continues:

4 I am substituting these places for the ones mentioned by Jack, choosing them because (like the places Jack identified) they are "across the water" from each other.

NORMAN: Now this lady is showing me a dog. She's showing me quite a big dog, which would not be bigger than a Labrador. It's a light fawn color, this dog, and quite big. I have a feeling there were two at one time, but one of them passed and just the one was left. And she had that for quite a number of years.
JACK: No.
NORMAN: You don't remember that, either?
JACK: No, she didn't have any dogs, that was — no. We had dogs, but not her.
NORMAN: Did — you didn't have a big one like that?
JACK: We did, but not her….
Norman: Okay. Well, she's showing me this big dog, so that's what she's trying to link to, then. I thought it was her, but it doesn't have to be her. It can be you. You did have a big dog like that?
JACK: Mm hm.
NORMAN: Right. Okay.

The curious dynamics of this conversation are becoming clearer. Jack has a particular woman in mind. Despite the string of "no's" so far, Norman has said something that made enough sense for Jack to identify who the woman in the spirit world must be. Jack continues to hold Norman to the strictest standards of evidence, pointing out that although his family owned a big dog, the woman he is thinking of did not.

Norman pauses for fifteen seconds. Then he says, "I feel that you didn't always live in the same place. There seems to have been a move when you were young." Jack's response is inaudible, and Norman says, "Pardon?" Jack responds, "Multiple times."

NORMAN: Oh, multiple times. Oh, well, she's talking about moving. [Sixteen second pause.] And you had to change school in some stages. Right. She says that was sometimes quite difficult for you.
JACK: Could be, yeah.

NORMAN: I think she's changed into trying to talk about you rather than herself, because I'm not getting evidence from her. So she's trying to give evidence of the things that you know but I don't know, you see? [Five-second pause.] Now, I've no idea what grows around that area, but what I'm seeing at the moment are orchards. As though there must be some area, somewhere there, that's got orchards. I do know that Canada's big for its trees, and all the rest of it.
JACK: There are orchards around, but not that we would be familiar with.
NORMAN: Nowhere where you lived… there were orchards?
JACK: Around, but not —
NORMAN: Well.
JACK: Direct, directly where [inaudible].
NORMAN: Okay, around. She's talking about the area, you see. [Seven-second pause.] And I get the name "Peter" around you somewhere.
JACK: Yeah, I can take that.
NORMAN: [Seven-second pause.] Something to do with Peter, whether it's him or something to do with him, I'm seeing someone playing the violin.
JACK: Can't take that one.
NORMAN: You don't recognize that. Right. Well, I'm definitely seeing a violin being played, or a string instrument of that nature. [Thirteen-second pause, near the end of which Norman gives a small laugh.] She says that you will realize one or two of these things later.

In this stretch of their conversation, Norman and Jack seem almost competitive. Norman suggests that moving house was difficult for Jack when he was young, and Jack is noncommittal: "Could be, yeah." Norman mentions orchards, and Jack says there were none near him, although some were "around" his area. Norman suggests this is close enough. After this exchange comes one solid hit, when Norman offers the name "Peter" and Jack affirms that this makes sense ("Yeah, I can take that.") Names are highly valued as evidence, so this feels like a break-

through — but immediately after this, Norman mentions a violin being played, and Jack rejects it.

The reading goes on for another minute and a half. Norman says Jack will be traveling, and it will be profitable: "there's some more money at some stage there." Jack jokes that he "can always take that one." At the end, Norman apologizes, saying, "Sorry I was slow," and Jack responds, "It's okay."

Tanya Luhrmann describes how modern British practitioners of magic and witchcraft learn to see evidence that their magic works. In their rituals, Luhrmann writes, they "maintain a sense of the possibility of falsification," judging some rites as successes and others as failures. By doing this, they come to see themselves as testing the truth of their claims, although failures do not call the whole system into question, just individual performances. Small failures in a ritual can help confirm people's sense that the larger project is working and greater truths confirmed. Over time, practitioners experience "interpretive drift," coming to think and feel that what once seemed extraordinary is now normal (Luhrmann 1989, 123, 312).

In Spiritualism, this cultivated normalcy — the sense that evidence is regularly gathered, and the dead can always communicate — never makes mediumship dull. No matter how experienced the medium or committed the audience, there is always (at least there was for me) the feeling that attempting to speak with the dead is both strange and sacred. It is a classic ritual: something set apart, a patterned engagement with extrahuman forces. It is not easy to do. It can evoke profound emotion. Like belief as proposition and commitment, and like questions of authenticity troubled by possibilities of fraud, success and failure in mediumship need to be considered in the same frame, necessarily going together while being held apart. Norman's difficult exchange with Jack shows that some things do not count as evidence, and also brings his, and others', successful performances into high relief.

* * *

I wish I could say that eighty percent of all mediums' readings are successful, ten percent are unsuccessful, and ten percent are inconclusive, because saying something like this would give readers the delicious crunch of numbers. But trying to identify a reading as successful or unsuccessful only shows how slippery the features of spiritual experience are. A medium might finish a reading and you might be uncertain what to think. A reading you don't grasp today might make sense tomorrow, or later on. For some audience members, a detail confirmed after the reading might flip an unsatisfactory reading to a satisfactory one. And when the reading is for someone else, you cannot always tell how they feel about it. I once heard a reading which I was sure the recipient would find unconvincing, even problematic, but he told me after the service that it had been "very, very accurate."[5]

Norman's reading for Jack was remarkable for its number of nos, but calling it unsuccessful would overlook the fact that Jack clearly had a woman in mind whom he thought Norman might have been in touch with. Both Jack and Norman were committed to the larger project of communicating with the spirit world. It was just a trouble spot, a rough day. The large majority of Spiritualist readings fall between the polar examples I have given in the last two chapters. There are usually yeses and nos, along with hesitation, speculation, tentative hope, and intimations of wonder.

But the polar examples are instructive. They also lend themselves well to storytelling. Mediums tell stories about astoundingly accurate readings, and also about the times they floundered. For example, speaking at a CSA service in March 2018, Lynette recalled that "my very first platform performance was woeful, to say the least." Norman interjected cheerfully, "It

5 Some investigators have tried to quantify mediums' successes and failures. For example, James Hyslop had four sittings with the renowned medium Leonora Piper, over the course of which 205 specific events were mentioned. Of these, Hyslop concluded that "152 were true, 37 unverifiable, and 16 false" (Blum 2007, 245; see also Tomlinson 2022).

wasn't that bad." He had helped train her in mediumship, and, as Lynette laughingly told the congregation:

> Norman threw me in at the deep end. And I was very, very new, and knew very little about Spiritualism. I knew almost nothing about communication. I hadn't read many books. I'd seen [British medium] Doris Stokes on television, but not doing a demonstration…. And all I did for the next twelve, eighteen months — 'cause he made me do platform — was give psychic readings.
>
> And one night I was going to do a service, and he said, "Why don't you try to see somebody?" Well, y'know, big joke. And surprisingly — I could not believe it: the very last reading I gave, I saw somebody. And even more amazing was, the person recognized it.

Told in the playful, bantering style Lynette and Norman had achieved as a long-married couple, the story had a serious meaning. Failure in mediumship is normal.

Although anyone can become a medium, and people in the spirit world want to communicate with us, tuning into the right vibration takes persistence and the willingness to fall flat, again and again. At some point, you will sense a person signalling you from the spirit world. But practical knowledge about what to do with this experience is hard won, and even veteran mediums have bad days. They will start conversations that never take shape, but spin inside themselves and then slip away, unresolved.

CHAPTER 6

Spirit Guides and the Daily Afterlife

Alfred Russel Wallace argued in his book *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* (1875, 223) that "the cardinal maxim of Spiritualism is, that every one must find out the truth for himself." He meant that people should personally examine the evidence mediums claim to produce. He was convinced that any objective observer would conclude that mediums' effectiveness was proven, their statements accurate, and their theories true. But his words can be read from another angle. "Finding the truth" can mean that you have the ability to discover universal truth, or it can mean that the truth you discover is unique to your experience. Although Wallace was not arguing for this second sense, some modern Spiritualists tend in this direction. Influenced by New Age emphases on personal experience and self-discovery, some Spiritualists conclude that your truth might not be my truth, but both are true.[1]

Spiritualism in Australia and the United Kingdom has seven official principles. They are credited to the medium Emma Hardinge Britten. Sometimes Robert Owen, a famed nineteenth

1 Wallace's position was shared by working-class and lower middle-class British Spiritualists who, as the historian Logie Barrow (1986) observes, had considerable confidence that despite their own scant book-learning, they could figure out as well as anyone else how the universe operated.

century utopian activist, is named as her source in the spirit world.[2] Reading the principles aloud is required of churches affiliated with the Melbourne-based Victorian Spiritualists' Union, as the Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA) is. On the Powerpoint slide displayed during CSA services, the phrase introducing the principles is "We acknowledge." It is followed by:

1. The Fatherhood of God
2. The Brotherhood of Man
3. The Communion of Spirits and the Ministry of Angels
4. The Continuous Existence of the Human Soul
5. Personal Responsibility
6. Compensation and Retribution Hereafter for All Good and Evil Deeds Done on Earth
7. Eternal Progress Open to Every Human Soul

The first two principles recall a Judeo-Christian heritage and put humanity in a family relationship with God. The third places spirits and angels in helpful connection with living humans. The fourth and seventh principles form a natural pair, and are Spiritualism's core contribution to a modern philosophy of spiritual existence: because humans are essentially spiritual creatures, we live forever; yet eternity is not endless sameness, but growth toward perfection. A notion of karma emerges in the fifth and sixth principles: we are responsible for our actions, and will be rewarded or punished accordingly.

Commenting on the principles, Spiritualists describe them as guidelines rather than doctrine. For example, Janet Adams said at a CSA service in May 2017, "the seven principles of Spiritualism are not just an act of faith. These principles are a guide for our conduct here on earth." At a service two months later, Lynette Ivory recalled that when she became a Spiritualist, she

2 For an analysis of the principles' history, see Gaunt (2013; 2014; and 2015). The US-based National Spiritualist Association of Churches has its own list of nine principles; see Ptacin (2019, 47–49, 226–27).

and Norman discussed the principles "quite a lot, and I found that they're not quite as simple as they appear. If you are not interested in philosophy, they're still excellent guides for living your life." Norman, for his part, had joked at a service in June that the principles "sound a bit complicated and a bit… religious-y." But, he continued, they are not as complicated as they seem, and no one is compelled to believe them: "We lend them to you. We use them quite a lot, but we don't say to you they're the only truth. We don't say to you that you must believe. We say: have a look at them, and see what you think, and see how you can apply them to your life."

The gendered phrasing of the first and second principles — the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man — became a topic of mild disagreement at the CSA in 2017 and 2018. In July 2017, during our mediumship training course, Lynette mentioned that some Australian Spiritualists had decided to change the phrasing because of their concerns over sexist implications. She and Norman asked members of the Association for their thoughts, and the CSA committee (with myself as a member) discussed the possibilities in late 2017 and early 2018. In March 2018, the committee voted for a compromise, retaining the original phrasings while providing a new plain-language version underneath each one. "The Fatherhood of God" was to be followed by "(The energy that permeates all things and is the source of everything)," and "The Brotherhood of Man" by "(We are one, yet we are individual)."

The debate over the seven principles had not been heated, but it did reveal a range of opinions which is typical for Spiritualism and probably all religious groups. Ask about reincarnation, free will, or any spiritual topic and you are likely to get various answers. Any binding doctrine would be rejected by Spiritualists, who each hold their individual knowledge and experience to be authoritative. And yet, like other modern people keen to express their individuality, Spiritualists wind up agreeing on many things. The main thing everyone agrees on — the heart, the core — is that there is no such thing as death.

* * *

True, we die physically. But humans are essentially spiritual beings, and our spirit selves exist before and after our physical bodies do. Lynette stated the position neatly on the first night of the mediumship course, when she told us: "Death doesn't really exist, because we exist forever." This does not mean Spiritualists treat the deaths of loved ones lightly, or shrug at the thought of their own. It just means that, intellectually, they commit to an understanding of continuous being as the warp and woof of the universe.

"You know, I've been to a number of funerals," Norman said at a CSA service in June 2018. He continued:

> I've done quite a lot myself. And it's not uncommon, when you do a few more, if you're clairvoyant, to see the person who has passed standing by the coffin. Sometimes sitting on or standing on the coffin, because they haven't got that dread of the coffin that we have. Because they realize that it doesn't really mean anything, because it's just a physical vehicle that's been put down, and the real self continues on. And I have seen that myself.
>
> And then, often — and you know, you have people lined up at a funeral — and they come and they stand with the person that they're trying to comfort. And they're sending healing to them like we did just now. People from Spirit can send healing to other people. And they come and they stand with the person who's grieving, and they send energy to that person. And sometimes, it really makes a difference.

When he said this, I thought it was funny and had a kind of scapegrace beauty. I could picture a ghost hanging out, leaning on his own coffin with bent elbow, insouciant, slightly confused by why people were making such a big deal of things. Reading Norman's words now, I realize he offered a more serious image, one with the typical roles of mourning mixed up. Rather than the living comforting each other about the dead, the dead

actively want to comfort and heal the living, even at their own funerals.

Becoming a medium, I learned, meant understanding the philosophy of Spiritualism. Because although Spiritualism is a capacious movement, and people believe a wide variety of things, they don't believe just anything. Starting with the affirmation that there is no such thing as death, Spiritualists develop their ideas systematically.

First comes the idea of "Spirit" itself. When Spirit is given a pronoun, it is usually "they." It is the collectivity of the dead — "people who've passed from this world," as Norman put it succinctly at a service in February 2018. And as "they" or "them," Spirit are agents who can act upon us. At a minimum, we count on them to show up when we are practicing mediumship so we can prove their continued existence and pass along their messages. But as Norman suggested with his coffin story, Spirit does more than this. They heal us, too.

Spirit is also a place, or at least is shaped grammatically like one, because Spiritualists frequently speak of the dead as being "in Spirit." Nineteenth-century Spiritualism introduced the term "Summerland" for the spirit world, although I did not hear anyone at the CSA use it.[3] The afterlife is sometimes identified with existence on the astral plane. Over the past century and a half, countless authors have written about what the terrain of Spirit is like. Whether called Summerland, the astral plane, or simply being in Spirit, the afterlife for Spiritualists tends to be essentially the same as life for us here and now. There are some minor differences. For example, people in Spirit are not aware of time the same way we are. But individuals retain their person-

3 Andrew Jackson Davis developed the concept of Summerland in his extensive writings; see, for example, Davis (1867). He is credited with having foretold the arrival of the Fox sisters when he wrote in 1847 that the truth of spirit communication would "ere long present itself in the form of a living demonstration" (Davis 1847, 675). For a discussion of Davis's influence in Spiritualism, see Podmore (1902, I:154–76).

alities. In Spirit, your funny and well-dressed grandfather is still funny and well-dressed.[4]

Socially, the spirit world is similar to life on earth, too. The people you associate with here are the people you will associate with there. Those who love working in the garden now will continue gardening in the spirit world, although the flowers will be of unimaginably brilliant colors. Those who enjoy drinking beer with their mates can do this, too, although beer in the spirit world is not alcoholic. This philosophy of "affinity" has sometimes been taken to an extreme. One nineteenth-century medium, channeling Thomas Paine, reasoned that murderers

4 One historian described the Spiritualist otherworld as "imaginable, familiar, and attainable"; another scholar observed that "Astral bodies of the departed looked… very much like their earth bodies had looked except that physical disabilities had disappeared. Spirit babies grew up into spirit men and women just as they would have done had they lived. The spirit realms presented landscapes very similar to terrestrial ones" (McGarry 2008, 19, and Moore 1977, 54; see also Singleton 2013). Or, as Ruth Brandon wrote wryly of Arthur Conan Doyle's vision of the afterlife, it was "rather like Sussex, slightly watered down" (1983, 222).

A famous example of reportage from the spirit world is Lodge (1916). One of the most entertaining books of this kind is E. Stanley Brookes's *My Four Thousand Ghosts* (1968), which was recommended to me by Debby Walker of the CSA. The book is an account of a long-term project in which Brookes interviewed deceased people. He asked questions and the spirits responded through a medium; around twelve mediums participated in the long-term project, one per session. Within the spirit world, the master of ceremonies was Edgar Tozer, late president of the Victorian Spiritualists' Union. He was assisted by a "Spirit Rescue Circle" with 49 spirit helpers at each event. This somewhat complex setup gives the sessions the character of a talk show in front of an audience on the astral plane.

The spirits Brookes interviewed are diverse, colorful, and sly. A former prostitute from London named Trudy, whose Cockney accent is reproduced by the entranced medium ("Daise and me 'ave lots o' torks about hit now an' we understands — we hare ghosts! Blimey! Funny — ain't it?"), tells how she now brings spirits of deceased children to sit beside their living mothers, who are unaware of their children's presence but nonetheless comforted. Robert Burns says he is still writing poems in the spirit world and jokes that if he couldn't do so, he might as well be dead. George, another Londoner, drove a horse-drawn hansom cab while alive, but in the spirit realms has upgraded to a motor car, and delights in startling pedestrians by honking at them (Brookes 1986, 122–23, 131, 257).

in the afterlife must hang out with other murderers and find it satisfying — so he wrote that they form "one congregated brotherhood of crime," with killers able to "use imaginary weapons, and commit imaginary murders" (Wood 1864, 93; see also Cox 2003, 103–4).[5]

Training as mediums in Lynette's and Norman's course, we learned how to think about this spiritual landscape and the lives lived within it. In the sixth week, Norman indicated that because people in the spirit world form the same groups they did while alive, some of them might not want to contact the living. For example, he said, if they were staunch Roman Catholics in this life, then in the spirit world they were still staunch Roman Catholics — at least initially — and might reject Spiritualism even as they were experiencing its truths firsthand. Over time, he said, they would become more aware of their new situation, but soon after death they could well be the same old stubborn people they were before. Lynette added a surprising detail: because the spirit world was so comfortable, it could get boring. A person who enjoyed gardening and baking cakes would keep doing this, and

5 The idea of affinity, which came into Spiritualist thought partly from Emanuel Swedenborg's influence, could be erotic. For example, in 1872 William Bowley — writing "under spirit-impression," as he put it on the title page — told the story of a spiritual journey taken by a deceased Baptist minister, Reverend Wilson, who discovered the difference between earthly marriage and true love. Bowley's term for true love, or the reuniting of originally coexisting souls, is the awkward "affinital love." Marriage is a church thing, but affinital love is pure and perfect. Rev. Wilson begins his afterlife by finding two of his deceased parishioners in what looks to him like an adulterous relationship. The lovers admonish the minister, telling him he's too new to the spirit world to know what he's talking about. The reverend then finds himself falling in love with a married woman, Mrs. James. Insisting on the literal truth of the bible, he realizes he can't be in heaven, but it's clearly not hell, either — so he wonders if somehow he ended up in Catholic purgatory (Bowley 1872, 47). He then watches a play performed by spirits in a majestic theater called the Theoresonium, intended to impart spiritual knowledge. As it happens, the themes and characters of the play mirror those of Rev. Wilson's earthly life, so he learns the natural truth of Spiritualism, and it becomes clear that he and the former Mrs. James will be (re)united in affinity.

eventually reach the point where they thought there must be more to existence than this.

In the fifteenth week of the course, Norman mentioned that spirits can give wrong information. He said that a leader of Melbourne's Victorian Spiritualists' Union once "brought through" the spirit of a scientist who gave incorrect details about the solar system. But, he explained, this was because the scientist had lived in the 1800s and his knowledge was simply out of date. I asked Norman about this later, and he said a scientist in Spirit could stay involved with the latest developments by observing and working with other scientists. People in the spirit world can learn and grow by staying in touch with the physically living. But they can also be shy, confused, and wrong. They are human.

The afterlife, we learned as trainee mediums, is a happy, gentle place. But it isn't paradise. It's life, continued. We can learn and grow there, or just relax and not do very much. Eternal existence follows the law of perfectibility. All people — no matter how awful their actions or miserable their lives — are bound to make progress to higher levels of spiritual existence according to the design of the universe. And there are no accidents. If you were in a car crash, it was because your spiritual self agreed to it long beforehand in concert with the spirits of the other people involved, who also benefited in some way. It was all ultimately for a higher purpose, however difficult it might be to accept when you're standing in the twisted plastic and smashed glass arguing over insurance.

The principle of perfection prompts a disagreement over the reality of reincarnation. If we are essentially spirit beings who become physical in order to gain a full appreciation of existence, do we need to return to fleshly bodies again and again to keep learning, or is once enough? The Spiritualists' National Union (SNU) of the United Kingdom, which many Australian Spiritualists consider authoritative, has historically been skeptical about reincarnation. An official publication of the SNU's Philosophy and Ethics Committee offers three reasons for their longstanding rejection of the idea of reincarnation. One is that it seems to clash with the principle of eternal progress, which does not

mention drifting back into the muck of physical life. Second, the SNU holds that reincarnation has never been firmly proven. Third, different spirit communicators have given different information about reincarnation over the years, so it's hard to know what to believe, although the authors adroitly turn this observation into a new possibility: perhaps spirits who want to reincarnate can do so, and those who don't want to, don't have to. In the end, the SNU authors diplomatically urge individual Spiritualists to decide for themselves what they think is the correct position on reincarnation, and not to close off the possibility of revising their opinions in the future (Oates, Hopkins, and Austin 2010, 73–81).

At the Canberra Spiritualist Association, Norman and Lynette Ivory were firmly convinced that reincarnation was a well-established fact. They knew their certainty was not quite in agreement with the SNU position, but they were confident nonetheless. Indeed, Norman has written three books and the second one is titled *Reincarnation: Why and How.* Speaking on the seven principles at a CSA service in May 2017, he suggested that the point of reincarnation was its newness: "growing up with new challenges, new things to teach us things, new lessons to learn, new growth to make, new progress to find for ourselves in life." He added:

> Sometimes I wonder why we come at all. Sometimes it's just too tough. But we somehow manage to find our way along, and we learn a lot. Hopefully, hopefully, one incarnation or another, we will be able to remember consciously all the things we've learnt, so that in that particular lifetime, we'll be able to really fill in some gaps, and really make some progress.

* * *

The nature of the afterlife became a surprise topic during a private reading I had with Jane Hall. I had seen her work several times at the CSA, and was always impressed by her boldness

and energy. She was the medium who, six months earlier, had described a man I thought could be my father, although another audience member jumped in to claim him (see Chapter 3). She also once memorably channeled the spirit of a cat. I asked Jane if I might interview her for my research project and also have a paid private reading. She agreed to both.

On this warm spring day in September 2018, I met Jane at her home. We settled into comfortable chairs across from each other. First, I interviewed her for a bit less than an hour and a half. After a brief break, we began the reading. It was similar in many ways to those given publicly at CSA services. Jane's language was plain and conversational. She offered some information about deceased relatives of mine that was specific and accurate, some that did not make sense to me, and some parts of our conversation were tentative and unresolved. The main difference was length: my private reading lasted a few minutes short of an hour, whereas most readings at CSA services do not pass the ten-minute mark. Jane also explained as she began to work that she would approach things differently than normal because she knew I was conducting a research project. She would explain her method to me so I could understand how she was working. In doing so, she said, she would try not to let her conscious mind bring her "out of the power" of spirit connection, which would force her to work psychically. She trusted that people in the spirit world would see that this was a different kind of reading and give just a bit more time and information than usual.

Near the beginning of the reading, Jane mentioned that during our interview she had become aware of a man in the room with us, listening to our conversation. She asked if my father was "in Spirit," to which I said yes, unsure if she remembered the CSA service from half a year earlier. Jane said she was also in contact with a woman in spirit, although it took another twenty minutes to get back to her and identify her as my mother's older sister. Near the end of the reading, another woman showed up who sounded like my mother's mother. But for much of the reading, we stayed focused on my father.

Discerning family connections and telling me about the impressions she received, Jane spoke, and I worked with her as a receptive listener to help bring forth the character of the late Gerald Tomlinson. He had been an optimist, but died slowly of cancer and needed assistance at the end. From the spirit world, he worried for my mother, alone in the house as she now was. He enjoyed music. I couldn't help but blurt out that it was country music, which the rest of the family was not fond of. And he happily recalled a family vacation somewhere on the water, which I suggested was probably Nantucket. My father's ashes might still be in Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey, but now he had become present in a new way, a person wrapped in stories suggested in a medium's sitting room in Canberra. As I said earlier in the book, I had not thought my interest in Spiritualism was connected to my father's death. Although I missed him, I was not looking to keep him near. But Jane was doing what a skilled medium does. She was bringing him to life by sketching his character and suggesting stories.

There were two moments during the reading which foreshadowed the surprising description of the afterlife Jane would offer. First, she said that although my father was not a hoarder, he liked collecting things: "It's like I've got a lot of books, I've got a lot of everything." Second, she said that he liked studying and learning, and had been a teacher. He had a good breadth of general knowledge, including knowledge of sports, and was "the type of person you'd want at a trivia night." Then, forty minutes into our session, having established my father's identity as a curious collector, Jane decided to "see if I can see what he shows me from the spirit world." She explained that this was a technique she had learned from Tony Stockwell, a British medium who has conducted training courses in Australia.

> So this is something that I like to do that Tony has taught us — that you ask them what they are doing in the spirit world now. And you can see what they will be doing. And I'm just gonna see if he will show me what he does in the

spirit world now. [As she speaks this last sentence, her speech becomes noticeably slower and softer.]

Okay. Um. Uh, okay. Uh, this is quite strange.

Um, so, I see in the spirit world — this is quite strange. It's like he's archiving specimens of — I'm not sure if they're insects, or if they are, like, things — creatures. It's like he's — . [She exhales.]

This is very interesting. It's like in the spirit world, he's archiving — you know when they… put spiders and creatures in plastic discs so kids can look at them?

"Yes," I say. Jane continues:

Yeah? It's like… this is, like, what he's doing. He's doing this to, like, preserve. It's like, preserving things for future — would he have worked with science when he was here?

MATT: No.

JANE: Okay, because it's — this is the only thing I — it's, like, I feel like… did he do archiving when he was here?

MATT: Yes. Yes.

JANE: Right.

MATT: But not of specimens.

JANE: Not of specimens. But he did archiving. 'Cause this is what he's doing on the other side. I see him. He's archiving. But he's archiving, like, specimens in the spirit world. So it's like keeping these… it's almost like these are sacred. It's like the sacred form of insects. So it's like he's archiving the sacred geometrical shapes of insects in discs, but he's archiving them in the spirit world. This is a very unusual thing. I've never seen anything like this…. You know how a shell —

MATT: Mm, yes.

JANE: — has? Well, it's almost like he's working with archiving things of sacred geometrical existence. And they're, like, discs of insects.

MATT: Wow.

JANE: Wow, right? Wow. That's a very interesting thing to be doing. So it's the archiving, though, that I'm drawn to,

> that he's fascinated with. It's like keeping these things for future — yeah, it's like keeping them for future, when they're dying off. You know, it's like — extinct! That's what they are. They're extinct. So he's archiving extinct insects, and extinct creatures, which are small, not big. And he's archiving them in the spirit world. And I have to say, I know we talked about education with him before. It's almost like he's archiving them, but he's also explaining them to people. So it's like he's teaching people the process of archiving, and how it works, and the system of locating these things, and the process. He's like a super librarian, this guy.

She went on to say that the archiving system he was using in the afterlife was not like anything she had seen before or knew how to describe, "because our archiving system is something that goes into something rigid, whereas this is an archiving — like a vibrational archiving system."

In the transcript above, I included some of Jane's "ums" and "likes," rather than smoothing them out of the text, because when she began describing her vision, her tone was one of wonder, discovery, and struggling to find the right words. As she went on, she became more excited and spoke more surely, having gotten a handle on the odd scene she saw before her ("extinct! That's what they are"). My father, who enjoyed history, was now a historian of a decidedly alternative stripe, cataloguing the sacred geometry of insects for the cause of universal future knowledge. After getting confirmation from me that my father enjoyed archiving things, Jane then delivered the lesson that the afterlife is essentially like this life: "it's like he's taken his passion from here over there, and continuing to work in that field — but in the spirit world, 'cause we don't just stop working. We have things to do over there."

* * *

In another private sitting, the medium was Lynette Ivory and the recipient was my mother-in-law, Joan. Lynette did not

describe the work of the afterlife as Jane had, but mentioned how the deceased feel about their bodies and how they choose to represent themselves. As Joan understood it, Lynette succeeded in bringing through the spirits of her mother and husband. Discussing the results at the end of the session, Joan said the description of the male spirit was "really quite accurate" although "the age was wrong." Lynette then explained that people in the spirit world "show themselves at a time when they felt comfortable. When they were okay, and life was good for them."

For me, these descriptions of the afterlife were delicious food for thought, but they also left a curious aftertaste. On one hand, life in the spirit world is essentially like life here. We have our friends and family. We do our work and enjoy our hobbies. On the other hand, life in the spirit world is radically different. My father's main historical interests had been the Civil War and minor league baseball, and his last major archiving project was to assemble old files of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sussex County, New Jersey. Going from those interests to curating a sacred collection of insects is not just a stretch, but a snap into a very different kind of space.

And the spirit world gets more complicated than this. From the beginning of my mediumship training, I heard about "guides." These are spirits who help you in your work as a medium. Some work with you during regular mediumship, and others perform specific functions, like teaching you philosophy, protecting you, or helping with spiritual healing. Guides might be deceased humans, but they can be extrahuman figures, too.

Nineteenth-century mediums often worked with "controls," guides who interacted with other spirits who wanted to communicate through the medium (Marryat 1891, 108; McGarry 2008; and Manning 2018). They were the medium's medium. Controls also sometimes spoke directly through the medium while she was in trance. I did not hear people use the word "control" at the CSA, but the old expectation remains strong: every medium has a guide or guides to help out.

For example, speaking at a service in October 2017, Debby Walker recalled when she was discovering Spiritualism in her

homeland, New Zealand, and a medium named Clint transfigured into his guide, Jimmy:

> Clint was, I think, in his thirties around that time. Young. Blond hair. Just a typical Kiwi bloke, really. And when he brought Jimmy in, his whole demeanor changed. His whole face changed, and he became an older gentleman. He had a Scots accent. Jimmy, his guide that he channelled in, was a gentleman who lived, when he was last on the earth, in Scotland, in the Isle of Skye. So, at the top of the UK. So, hence, he was totally different. This was my first time I'd ever seen someone ever do that, and I was just in awe.

I have never seen a medium transfigure into their guide like this, but the general principle that guides show up to help was shared by the mediums I met. At a service in April 2017, Norman said to the audience: "For those of you who don't know, I have a guide here, and he points where he wants to go." In other words, his spirit guide linked him to the person in the audience with whom the person in the spirit world wanted to communicate.

As nineteenth- and twentieth-century mediums developed Spiritualist philosophy, spirit figures became identified with specific roles. Two of the most prominent were the healer and the "doorkeeper" (or "gatekeeper"). Healers work with mediums who channel energy through their bodies to cure people of illnesses. At a service in July 2017, Janet Adams explained that a healer "uses a channel for the healing energy from Spirit. So it comes from Spirit through their spirit to the spirit of the recipient. It's that simple. A healer can be used to help healing, to bring comfort, upliftment, easing of pain, or help at passing."[6] Doorkeepers are bouncers. They mediate between other spirits and the medium, and protect the medium if evil spirits show

6 Vieda Skultans, an anthropologist who studied Spiritualism in South Wales fifty years ago, learned that local Spiritualists felt that "the power of healing" was "the greatest gift which spirit can bestow on human beings" (1974, 40).

up. Although Spiritualism's portrait of the afterlife is a gentle and sunny one, some people obviously lead terrible lives and might stir up trouble once they're on the other side. A strong doorkeeper guards mediums against this threat.[7]

Alongside these various guides and helpers, some spirit personalities become famous for helping in different ways. Especially in Spiritualism's early days, Benjamin Franklin spoke through many mediums. Indeed, he was credited with having invented the "spirit telegraph" now connecting the spiritual and physical worlds. An exceptionally popular spirit in the nineteenth century was a young woman called Katie King, who appeared physically through the work of several prominent mediums and was investigated enthusiastically by Sir William Crookes. And whole groups of people could become spiritual emblems. In the USA and Australia, for example, Indigenous Americans became highly visible spirit figures. They were portrayed as paragons of wisdom and connection to the natural world, reflecting what Catherine Albanese (2007, 248) calls "the abiding racialism of culture-as-usual."[8]

A notable split has developed between the regular dead of the spirit world — for members of the CSA, largely white and work-

7 Some members of the CSA conduct "house cleansings," releasing the spirits of negative people (dead drug users and psychopaths, for example) from the houses they infect. I was not able to participate in any house cleansings in Canberra, but for details see Ivory (2016b, 177–82).

8 See also McGarry (2008); on Benjamin Franklin being credited with establishing the spirit telegraph, see for example Hardinge (1870), Podmore (1902), and Kerr (1972, 9–10, 31). The literature on Katie King is particularly entertaining. Although she was a popular spirit figure, she had the unfortunate distinction of being exposed as the product of fraud in two countries. In London, a skeptical séance-sitter grabbed her spirit-hand and wound up grappling with the medium, who was hustled away by sympathizers and then found inside her cabinet, "dishevelled and distressed" (Brandon 1983, 110; see also Podmore 1902, II:152–53). In Philadelphia, she appeared regularly at the sittings of a married couple, but a local woman eventually confessed to playing the role of Katie (Braude 1989, 179–80, and Brandon 1983, 104). Trevor Hall (1962) suggests that Crookes's defense of Katie King's spiritual nature is explained by his sexual infatuation with the medium manifesting her, Florence Cook.

ing- or middle-class — and the guides and helper spirits who assist mediums and are often marked as ethnic others: Indigenous Americans, African Americans, Chinese, and Egyptians, for example. If you and your family are white Australians, the medium will generally bring through white Australian spirits for you, because those are your deceased loved ones; but the medium might well see herself helped in this task by spirit figures from other lands.

I asked Sarah Jeffery about her guides when I interviewed her in December 2018. I will quote her answer at length, because she elegantly describes guides' significance for mediums while also noting their mysterious, partially hidden nature — and she comments critically on the stereotypes that filter into visions of the afterlife.

Early in her training as a medium, Sarah said, her mentor Christine Morgan told her about guides: "Yes, they're there. You don't need to worry about it." Sarah continued:

> And so, for many years, that's exactly how I approached guides: to acknowledge that yes, there are helpers within the world of Spirit, but you know, we can't prove them…. And I've listened to people — and even some of my students, who know I disagree wholeheartedly with them — but everyone has a right to their own opinion. You know… why do the guides need to be known, if their role is to help us in the background? Did they have a need for that?
>
> I have never heard of anyone talk about their guides… who's said, "Oh, yeah, mine was a rubbish man." You know, it's always special, isn't it? It's always unique. And of course, then you tie that in with archetypes. You tie that into, okay, well, you know: the nuns, the doctors, the philosophers, the Native American Indians, the medicine man, the shaman, et cetera, et cetera. Now, I'm not suggesting that they aren't guides. But it sounds pretty common, doesn't it, that everyone's got one?

At this point, Sarah noted with amusement that she had pictures on her walls of "what looks like guides and monks and Native American Indians." An inspired "psychic artist" had painted them for her. Sarah said she could not prove whether or not these figures were her guides or her husband's guides.

> So, I look at them and I go: *Well, they're nice pieces of art.* They may or may not reflect reality. Does it matter?
>
> So, I didn't worry for a number of years. And then, it was actually the year I was going to the [Arthur Findlay College in the UK], I said to the spirit world: "Dear Spirit, if you're ready to be known, if you want to be known to me, I'm pretty keen. I'm pretty keen to know who you are." So I'd sort of put this thought out, and I travelled to the UK with another wonderful medium, an intuitive lady.… [We] went to the SAGB [Spiritualist Association of Great Britain], and we got to see two wonderful mediums on platform… Terry Tasker and Billy Cook. Two completely different styles of medium. But amazing. And we'd literally got off the plane, we were sitting in the front row, and Terry Tasker [said], "And you two are from Australia, and from a place called Canberra."
>
> And you think — *Okay, all right. You win!* Y'know, *How do you know that?* If you'd said "Sydney," we would have said, "Sure." But you've nailed it.
>
> Anyhow, so I had a reading with Terry Tasker. And now, I had had some experiences of who I felt one of my guides were. And I had pushed it away, pushed it away, pushed it away. Why? Because how did he present? As a Native American Indian. And all my discernment and all my training went: *Well, that's rubbish. That cannot be true. It's your mind.* Now, I had seen him subjectively stand in my doorway. I had had numerous experiences. But I just went *no, no, no, no, no. No, no, no, no. Sarah, you're just like everyone else. You're making it up in your mind. You're making it up.*
>
> So, I'm sitting in front of Terry Tasker, and I also had the feeling of another gentleman who also played into the clichés. Totally played into the clichés of a little Asian man with

> a good sense of humor. And so, this was a real issue for me. Because, like, *Well, come on, Sarah. This is the same as everybody else.* And why would I be getting this?

Sarah said she had kept her experiences to herself because she wanted evidence of who her guides were. She needed to have other mediums tell her, without her feeding them information, about her guides. If three or four reliable mediums give the same information, she said, "then that's probably the closest we're going to get to have it confirmed."

> So I would always say to people, "Don't discuss your guides. Don't tell people who you think your guides are. Because how, then, can you get that confirmation from other people, if people already know?" If people say "Ah, yes, I know you've got the Native American Indian," or "I know you've got the Oriental" [*sic*], and they've heard it from you, that's not gonna confirm anything for you.
>
> Anyhow, so I'm sitting across from Terry Tasker, who mentions in that reading the two chaps that I think are with me. I think: *Okay, that's pretty cool. That's pretty exciting. Okay, control yourself. Control yourself.*
>
> So then I go off to the [Arthur Findlay College] and I have a reading from another wonderful medium… who was on our week. She wasn't my teacher, but I had a reading with her. And in that reading, she then also mentioned the guides. And I thought: *Well, two for two. Two good mediums.* Normally mediums don't talk to me about guides at all.…
>
> I know that there are others that help me. Do I know who they are? No. For many, many years I felt that I only had males working with me. I now think that there is a lady who assists. But I don't really take notice. They don't play a part when I'm on platform. I'm not putting thoughts out to guides. I'm not seeking help from them. The only time when I'm working that I feel I'm being influenced by my helpers in the spirit world is generally when I'm talking philosophically. So, if I've got someone who's sitting in front of me, and they say, you

> know — it might be something about a suicide. And then I feel inspired to say certain things that I know is not coming from their family members. I know it's not just from my own knowledge. But I'm feeling that it's very important that I get a certain message across. That's probably the only time I sort of go, *Oh, someone's helping me here to make sure that I do no harm, and that I say the right thing.* But that's probably the strongest sense I have of my helpers stepping forward — when I'm working in that way. And it's not often….
>
> But I do believe everybody has helpers. I believe even those who aren't in the mediumship world will have someone within the world of Spirit, from first breath to last, who will be keeping an eye on them.

Sarah's remarkable description reflects guides' ambiguous nature in Spiritualist philosophy. In a movement devoted to interacting with largely unseen realities, guides can be a trompe l'oeil, revealing mysteries and keeping them mysterious at the same time. They inspire metaphysical reflection as they slip away from any kind of easy recognition.[9]

In the course of my research, I came to understand that guides are tremendously important to successful mediums. But in Australian Spiritualism, as Sarah suggests, they are not something you talk about too directly or too often. When I asked Jane about guides, she joked that there was "a lot of guide-worshipping going on" now, and added, "I think it's important that we shouldn't tell people what our guides are." If you talk about your guides too much, you weaken the chance that other mediums can confirm their identity to you independently. Then, too,

9 Hilary Mantel's novel *Beyond Black* (2005) skewers the figure of the spirit guide. The novel's main character, a fat medium named Alison Hart, is plagued by her guide, a potbellied little creep named Morris who (when he was physically alive) was in a gang of "fiends" who abused and tormented Alison and other women. Now the fiends are all dead, and afflicting Alison as much as ever. I have never heard a medium describe guides this way, but Mantel's ear for how mediums describe their work is otherwise pitch-perfect.

speaking about your guides might be seen as bragging. As one Canberra medium told me, her guide was a famous woman, and if she told people who the guide was, they might think she had a swelled head. Norman did, however, speak easily about his own guide, even thanking him in the acknowledgments to his first book.[10]

You cannot just go and find yourself a guide, as Sarah explained in her interview. But other mediums can let you know what they sense. In this regard, the CSA service of September 16, 2018, was intriguing for me. It was a good crowd, with twenty-one people in the room, six of them males, both comparatively high numbers. Sarah was "on platform" as the day's medium, and I was the chair — the master of ceremonies for the service. During the service, Sarah gave me a reading from my father's father. I had not known him well, so the reading could not go very far. But then Sarah added that she had something to tell me about my guide. She explained to the audience that she would not give information like this in public (explicit information about a guide, that is) and she would speak to me after the service. When we chatted later, she said that she did not have specific details, but that my father's father had let her know a male in the spirit world was helping me, although it was not himself.

* * *

Any discussion about guides can lead to a discussion about angels, and from there we can spring forth into a thoroughly enchanted universe. Over more than a century and a half, Spiritualist visions have described an increasingly dense and detailed metaphysical world. In his first book, Norman Ivory (2016) describes his encounters with nature spirits such as fairies and elves as well as negative spirits like phantoms and imps; his views on elemental spirits (salamanders for fire, sylphs for air,

10 "The last person I acknowledge is my long time guide from spirit — Sun Tsen. How the people in spirit can put up with the erratic emotionality of people in physical like me is a marvel" (Ivory 2016b, xi).

undines for water, gnomes for earth); various classes of angels from the colossal Lords of Karma and archangels down to the level of guardian angels; and the existence of the Great Man, "the totality of all human spirits" (209).

A major influence on Spiritualists' understandings of angels and elementals, and acceptance of reincarnation, is Theosophy. Helena Blavatsky, who created Theosophy in the late nineteenth century, criticized the Spiritualist practice of communicating with the dead. Indeed, she suggested that when mediums thought they spoke with the dead, they were likely being fooled by elemental spirits pretending to be deceased people. Instead of humble and sometimes banal dead folks, Blavatsky preferred to communicate with Masters, supreme spirits associated with Asian traditions as she imagined them. Theosophy informed much of the New Age movement of the twentieth century, which stoked people's senses that we control our spiritual fates, we serve as our own spiritual authorities, and we are inherently perfectible. In the late twentieth century, Theosophy-inspired channeling surged as gurus claimed to speak in the voices of extrahuman beings such as Seth, Ramtha, and Atun-Re.[11]

Some Spiritualists are troubled by their movement's New Age aura. Indeed, the CSA mediumship coursebook warns that New Age ideas have caused true Spiritualist philosophy to be "blurred or completely lost in some areas" (Ivory and Ivory 2017, 27–28). A sharp voice on this topic is Arlene Grant, a member of the Spiritualist community of Camp Etna in Maine, quoted extensively in Mira Ptacin's book on her experiences there, *The In-Betweens*. For Grant, as for Norman and Lynette, Spiritualism was more rigorous in the old days. Mediums trained seriously back then. But now, she laments of the summer visitors to her community, "They dance for gods and goddesses and bullshit. And we pay them" (Ptacin 2019, 141).

11 On the relationship between Spiritualism and Theosophy, see the discussions in Campbell (1980, 8–10, 16–20, 211n33) and Oppenheim (1985, 159–97). On channelling, see Heelas (1996); Brown (1997); and Klimo (1998).

Engaging with the philosophy of Spiritualism while I was training to be a medium pulled me in two directions. I appreciated how Spiritualists thought critically about their own practices, paying more than lip service to the idea of evidence. When Norman cautioned that his truth might not be mine, I felt this was an admirable gesture of humility but also a challenge. When Sarah expressed embarrassment that her guides seemed like ethnic stereotypes, I appreciated her wariness of our human tendency to project social models outward and then read them back to ourselves as scripture. But I was also continually reminded of how unmusical my attempts at mediumship were. Moreover, I have never seen ghosts, let alone angels or other extrahuman beings, and I have never heard disembodied voices. Other than seeing my father at his own memorial service for a split second, the closest I have come to mystical experience is hiking in the woods, feeling like a particular place is magnetic — like it has a pull, a draw, an energy that other places do not. These moments have been meaningful for me, but they are bland compared to the experiences reported by mediums who bring their vitalist philosophy of spiritual presence into everyday life. I will now turn to the life stories of some of these talented mediums, asking how they came to infuse their lives with wonder in the name of progress, committing themselves to living in an ordinary world through extraordinary connections.

CHAPTER 7

Life, Stories

"'She knows what a rifle looks like,'" Sarah Jeffery said, explaining how people in the spirit world would talk to her on her level. "'She wouldn't call a rifle a "gun."' You know?"

We were sitting in her home in the suburb of Jerrabomberra. It was a rainy early-summer afternoon, less than two weeks before Christmas. I was interviewing Sarah to hear her story of becoming a medium. I also wanted to know how she and her husband had developed their business, which brought overseas mediums to train Australians. In her mid-forties, with shoulder-length brunette hair, Sarah has a serious, professional manner. She has a military background which shows in her confidence and organizational skills. She is also a warm and generous conversationalist, and I learned at the beginning of our conversation that she and I shared something significant.

It's easy to suppose that people are drawn to Spiritualism because of a personal tragedy. Faced with the loss of a child, partner, or parent, some people get stuck at the first stage of grief — denial — and insist that their loved one simply cannot be gone. It's also easy to suppose that people who become mediums spent their childhoods playing with invisible friends, or, in a more gothic vein, seeing dead people, and learning that this is not normal when they try to tell adults about it.

But Sarah was not like that. Her interest was not piqued by profound loss or strange visions. As she put it, one often hears "mediums talking about always knowing on some level, having those invisible friends that no one else can see," she said. "I was not one of them. Absolutely not. And if I was, I certainly don't remember anything. There's nothing that stands out in my memory as a child to go, 'Oh, I knew about the spirit world.'" I felt a kinship with Sarah because I didn't have invisible friends as a child, either. I never saw dead people walking around. I didn't sleep in a bedroom crawling with shadows. The scariest moment of my childhood was seeing *The Shining* at age nine and developing a lingering unease about long hotel hallways.

Yet "there was always a seed," Sarah said, an interest in spiritual things stemming from her Anglican upbringing. Her father's mother was a strict Anglican who insisted you could only go to heaven if you accepted Jesus as your savior. When Sarah was twelve, her family moved to London and she attended a multiethnic school. As she recalls, "the whole of the world was represented in that class." Many of her new friends were not Christians, and Sarah did not think it was reasonable that they would all go to hell. Back in Australia several years later, when she was confirmed in the Anglican Church, she asked the priest if she would also go to hell if she didn't truly believe. And his answer, Sarah recalled, was "pretty much… 'yes.'" She thought this made no sense. How could a loving creator toss His children into eternal fire?

Living in Perth as a young adult, she went to see a medium named Christine Morgan one day. Sarah liked the fact that the medium did not have a woo-woo getup in her home. There was no crushed velvet. No dangling crystals. Just "a nice little study." And Christine gave her so much information that Sarah took seventeen pages of notes that day, utterly engrossed but also puzzled. She came up with names from the spirit world including "Ann" and "Jim," but Sarah did not know who they were. If the names were predictions of the future, she remembers thinking, "I'm not calling my kids that."

When she went home and told her parents about the experience, however, she got a shock. "My mother's eyes were like saucers," she recalls.

> And she said, "Well, that's your great aunt and uncle."
>
> So I was hooked. That was my moment of, *Okay, well, she didn't go through my bins. She couldn't have read this off my body language. She didn't know my name. She couldn't have researched me.* Even though she picked up military connections with the family, and all sorts of other details, my skeptical mind couldn't find a way to understand how she knew this information.
>
> So really, that was the start. Because on one level, I was so excited. And I could understand — you know when you have… you know the fellows who come knocking on your door to preach?
>
> MATT: Yeah. Jehovah's Witnesses?
>
> SARAH: The Jehovah's Witnesses. I could understand that. Because I suddenly felt: I have the answer. I know it's true. I've got the evidence. And if I could have knocked on everyone's door and told them, I would. [I laugh.] You learn very quickly that that doesn't work.

Fired with new passion, Sarah "basically stalked poor Christine Morgan for the next two years," as she put it, trying to learn everything she could about mediumship. She attended all of her workshops in Perth, and was eventually invited to join her private mediumship-development circle.

Sarah was in her early twenties at the time. She had become a mother, too, and being in charge of little lives made her think of her own mortality in new ways. "Becoming a mum really was the moment that my spiritual awareness and my mediumship began to bloom…. I don't think you can give birth and not have a profound experience of change," she reflects now. What would happen to her children if she passed away? She also keenly felt

her husband's absence when he was on military deployments. On Friday mornings, she recalls, she would drop her children off at daycare and go to her mediumship circle where (she now jokes) she earned the nickname "Crybaby" because she wept so often, both from the stress of being a new mother and the exhilaration of discovering mediumship.

After several years of training with Christine in Perth, Sarah was "devastated" to learn the military would move her young family on to a new posting in Canberra. She had loved her group in Perth. When she arrived in Canberra and began looking for training opportunities as a medium, she found the scene "a little bit lacking." She even invited Christine to come to Canberra to lead workshops several times. These events went well, but Sarah and her new friends in the capital did not know how to continue developing after their teacher left town.

And then, one day, Christine made it clear: It was Sarah's time to lead. She should begin teaching the Canberra group herself. As a medium, Sarah felt unprepared, but as a soldier, she accepted the challenge. And somehow, she found herself — over the course of years, hesitantly, like finding her way forward on slippery stones — moving into this new and unexpected role.

> Well, it's been over a dozen years now. But for many years, I just had people to my home. I was the leader, too frightened to call myself the teacher. At times it was the blind leading the blind. And Christine certainly assisted in the early days of trying to sort of help me through how I run a circle. And I'd contact her and say, "Oh, this has happened" or "That has happened" — "What's your advice?" But eventually, the grasshopper has to just run with it, and that's how it went.
>
> So I wouldn't encourage it as a way to develop mediumship, because it was *painful* a lot of the time. It was painful having to figure things out myself — make mistakes, learn, come back, start again….
>
> I'd go off to the odd workshop, the odd course. I travelled to Arthur Findlay College [the UK mediumship college]…. I had those sorts of little bits and pieces for my own devel-

opment. But really, it was kind of on-the-job training for me, to be truthful. And as I said, it's not a way [she laughs] I would recommend. I think those who've had mentors sort of holding their hand along the way, and taking them out on platform, and having that sort of ongoing mentoring, I think pays dividends.

But I've got there in the end. I've got there in the end.

Certainly the last couple of years, hosting top mediums to Australia [with her company], I probably learnt more in the last five or six years just by being able to… watch these top-level mediums, listen to them…. I've got to meet wonderful mediums from around the world, and I've hosted other people as well. So I think that's… a long, long journey. And I sort of think, If I'm really honest with myself, it's only in the last couple of years that I have that confidence to say: I'm a medium…. I'm a pretty good one.

But I look around these days, and there's so many people who've done a year, six months, three years, who want to be out on platform, and want to be doing everything else. And I think, *My goodness, my journey's been a good twenty years,* and it's only now that I go, "Yep, I can hold my own." But I also know that that comes from the bar [being] set high very early for me. And that was positive. It certainly meant I didn't go out too early with my mediumship.

Sarah's story of coming to mediumship defies simple summary. She did have lightning-strike moments, as when Christine told her the names of her great aunt and uncle whom Sarah had not even known. There was also the time, as recounted in Chapter 6, when mediums in London knew immediately that she was from Canberra and helped verify her spirit guides' identities. But much of her story is slower and more deliberate than this. She trained for many years. She was urged to take a leadership role before she felt ready. She persisted in her studies while also learning to train other mediums. Much of Sarah's own development came through private circles and her own efforts to bring overseas mediums to Australia.

In hearing her story, and watching her demonstrate at Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA) services, I came to see that Sarah's military background was not an incidental detail in her success as a medium. It was the key. Although soldiers and mediums might seem like characters who don't fit well together, for Sarah they harmonize. Her work ethic, organizational skills, insistence on tangible results, and plain determination has helped shape her mediumship. Indeed, her military experiences actively inform how she works with the spirit world and the messages she can receive. "The spirit world will try and make it easy," she explained. "They know that my background is as an army officer. So the number of times I will pick up the military connections — happens all the time for me. Now, some will say, 'Well, that's just because it's easy.' Well, of course!… Why wouldn't there be a discussion in the spirit world of, 'You're military, see if you can work with Sarah, because, you know what, she knows the difference between Army, Air Force, and Navy. She knows what a rifle looks like. She wouldn't call a rifle a "gun."' You know?"

I asked Sarah about her most memorable readings. She pointed out that it was easier to remember failure than success. She mentioned that when she asks her students to recall five times they have received exceptionally strong evidence of life after death, they always struggle to reply, but when she asks for "five times where you really flopped," they instantly have their answers.

But Sarah admitted she recently had "a wonderful experience," which brought us back to the military theme. On the day it happened, an old friend was coming to visit her. They had planned to chat about "philosophy and spiritual ideas." Sarah did not know her friend's family well, but knew his father had passed away, and had also been in the military. As she was in her kitchen, waiting for her friend to show up, she began to sense that a crowd was assembling in the spirit world. She realized that she would not be having a casual chat with her friend. A troop of soldiers had mustered on the astral plane and were waiting to communicate.

As I was in the kitchen getting ready, I just felt a crowd. I just felt a crowd. And I thought, *Oh, Sarah, this isn't gonna be a chat. This is gonna be a reading.…*

Literally, I ended up [going for] two hours. Two hours. And one after another, these lovely soldiers came through. And I feel quite emotional as I say it. And it brought me to tears during the reading, because they each had to give me just enough information that he would be able to distinguish which one it was. So, whether it was [a] helicopter crash, or whether it was some personal idiosyncrasy or something. But the lovely thing was, I knew his dad was there. And I said to him, "Your dad's just waiting for all the soldiers to have their say first." And he said, "Yep, that's exactly what my dad would do."

And right towards the end, you know, we've gone through all these young chaps — and again, with my military background, it was quite an emotional experience for me. Because I could almost sense the joviality of these young fellows going, "Oh, this is an old female officer, we'll give her a hard time!" [I laugh.] Almost laughing at me while working through me. And towards the end, I literally felt them go, "We're done. We'll step away." And it was like — [she exhales] *Oh my goodness, they're acknowledging now it's private time. It's private time between this boss of theirs and his family.* And then that's exactly what happened.

And the beautiful thing was that I was given all the little pieces of evidence of objects. And so, I could describe all these objects that belonged to my friend. And sometime or other, he sent me a photo just to show all the things that I had described in this box. It stands out for me, one, because it's recent; two, because I always feel even a greater pressure when it's somebody I know. Because I've gotta get past what I know. I've gotta prove my mediumship in a way that they are not left thinking, *Oh, but you know that.* And it was emotional. Because obviously I felt the emotion of the family. I felt the emotion of the soldiers. And I felt for my lovely, lovely friend.

Her emotions — her desire to give her friend something meaningful, her sense that the late soldiers were teasing her respectfully — was balanced by her determination to be a good medium, which is to say an accurate one. She needed to give her friend proof that his father was really there, and Sarah was not just drawing on her military knowledge or imagining things. The description of objects was strong evidence, and her friend was so impressed and grateful that he sent a photo showing that she was right: proof of her proof.

Sarah's emphasis on providing evidence echoes the classic Spiritualist insistence that life after death is not a matter of faith. It needs to be proven. Although emotion features in many aspects of mediumship — from mediums' feeling a particular way and interpreting it as, for example, a "grandmotherly" vibe, to their awareness that a listener is on the verge of tears and needs to be soothed — emotions are not supposed to be the main point. Sarah credits Christine Morgan for making her "discerning" about what counts as proof. "For that, I will always be grateful," she said during our interview. "Because certainly there's always been a test in my eyes of, *What's real? What's evidence?* Yes, there's a lot of love and light in what we do, but that's not all we do. And I think true mediumship gets a bit diluted by 'Let's all be lovely and sweet and friendly.' And, well, that's not actually life." Love and light is nice. Proof is better.

Proof in mediumship is not dry lab data, however, and it is always wrapped in emotion because the connections mediums make are ones grounded in people's senses of loss. Evidence should bring comfort. But sometimes, it can be disturbing. This does not mean it counts less as evidence — quite the opposite — but it does mean a medium needs to discuss some things especially carefully.

Sarah mentioned four memorably upsetting readings she had had. One was during her early training in Perth. As she sat in her very first workshop, she "had a sensation of being hung or strangled. And then I saw an image of a young man with brown spiky hair, and a casket. And I was so mortified, because I thought, *How do I even raise this?*" Christine came over to

help, asked what Sarah saw, and when she heard the description, the elder medium said that this was a murder victim she knew about because the police had asked her to help locate the body. His funeral was being held that same day. "So, pretty good evidence, isn't it?" Sarah reflected. "You've got this brand new girl who has never done mediumship in her life get this very, very strong feeling.… He was my first link" to the spirit world.

Another time, she was reading for a woman whose father had been a fire-and-brimstone Christian preacher. As she worked, Sarah got the sense that for this man, "mediumship… was a sin. It was the work of the devil. It was dark, and it was just evil." When she mentioned the father's feelings, the daughter was "sitting there laughing her head off," so obviously the reading did not cause distress. Sarah gave voice in our interview to how it must have appeared to the confused but loving preacher: "'My daughter's sitting there. So if this is the devil's work, I'm gonna use it [she and I laugh] to talk to my daughter.'"

On a third occasion, she brought through a woman's sister who "had been shot through the back of the head by the husband, who'd then killed himself." In a deeply disturbing sensation, Sarah could sense the woman's eyeball popping out of her head as she was shot. Even worse, as Sarah gave this reading, she sensed that the murderer's spirit was there, too. In a talk she gave at a CSA service in August 2017, she explained that the killer was mute, a shadow, and she "felt very little from him. It was as if he was being shown the ramification of his actions, but had not yet accepted responsibility or felt feelings of remorse." He did not try to send a message to his sister-in-law, and Sarah was not even sure if his wife — his victim — was aware that he was there in the spirit world with her. The story was horrifying, but Sarah told it not for shock value but rather to point to Spiritualism's emphasis on personal responsibility and spiritual growth. The man had done a horrible thing, and he did not yet realize how bad it was. Eventually he would. He could develop from there. His presence during Sarah's reading connecting the dead and living sisters, as awful as it was, was possibly a first step toward overcoming the trauma. But it had not been a pleasant step, and,

Sarah said drily, "I'm pleased that this particular reading was an anomaly for me."

"I've had people come through who really had to make some serious apologies to their family members for some pretty unspeakable things," she said during our interview. Once, she saw "a bottle of poison." She knew this must be a symbol, but she did not want to provoke her recipient by making her remember a terrible event. So she simply suggested that her listener would understand that poison had been "passed down through the family." This was enough information for the woman, who said she understood what Sarah was talking about.

Although these examples disturbed Sarah, they were rare. She joked that Spirit knew she was "a bit of a softie" and not good at handling information that was too upsetting. I have retold the stories to underscore her point that a medium's job is to provide evidence, and evidence is not always pretty — but it should make sense to recipients in a way that benefits them. As she explained, mediums' real job is "to bring healing." And healing comes from hard proof, not flimsy faith. Sarah admitted that she gets angry at whimsical mediums who say they're "bringing in Archangel This and Archangel That, [to which] my question is, 'Can you bring me my friend?'"

Mediumship can be seen as a kind of military mission, then, in which you can't escape the fact of death as you work toward a better life. "My dad would always say, being a military man, 'There's no atheist in a foxhole,'" she said near the end of our interview. "Why? Because military people actually have to think about their death. You know, lots of people say to me, '… [the] military and Spiritualism doesn't go together.' Yes, it does. Oh, yes, it does. Because people are having to think about death — whether their own or someone else's." For Sarah, this makes mediumship a vital job in a literal sense.

In one of the funniest and most revealing parts of our conversation, she described her own future passage to the spirit world as a kind of army exercise. She began by decrying "wimpy" mediums who soft-pedal Spiritualist principles because they don't want to offend anyone. "It's a bit wimpy to

go, 'Ah, no, look, I don't want to offend you. Believe whatever you want to believe.'" No, Sarah was suggesting, *don't* encourage others to believe whatever they want. They're probably wrong! Look for the proof of life after death which mediums regularly provide, and if you're a medium, speak plainly and get the job done. Sarah admitted that there were some Spiritualist tenets she did not fully agree with, but "when I am in a Spiritualist church… the only thing you will hear coming from my mouth is Spiritualist values." She felt that the nineteenth-century founders of Spiritualism, who made the movement grow in the face of public hostility, deserve our courage now. And the spirit world deserves our courage, too. She finished with a line that pulled together her sense of commitment, her military training, and her Aussie informality: "I know I'm gonna pop my clogs one day, Matt, and I'm gonna get over to the other side, and I don't want anyone chest-poking me. I don't want anyone saying, 'Well, Sarah, you said you were a medium. You said you believed in Spiritualist values. But you were too weak to own it'."

When she said this, all I could respond was, "I can't imagine anyone ever saying that about you." We both laughed.

In 2019, Sarah was elected the new president of the CSA, succeeding Norman Ivory upon his retirement.

* * *

Jane Hall, like Sarah Jeffery, is a well known Canberra medium in her forties. When Jane or Sarah was the day's medium at a CSA service, attendance was typically higher than usual. Both of them are charismatic, but in different ways. Sarah has a no-nonsense attitude which assures you that you are watching an expert. Jane is equally committed to giving evidence, but her style is sunny and playful. She walks a lot as she gives her mediumship demonstrations. Even when she stands still, she pulses with energy. After one of Jane's times "on platform" at the CSA, a fellow audience member (a distinguished anthropologist whom I had invited to come along) remarked that she had felt a tangible vibe from Jane, like an electric current.

As a child, Jane was fascinated by traces of life: shells she found on the beach, dead trees standing in fields, things that were once alive but were now transformed. She liked living things too, but she was most interested in "the part that's left behind," as she put it. She also sensed spirits in her bedroom — but these disturbed her. "As I child, I had to sleep with the light on," she recalls now. "I was too scared to have the light off, because soon as the light would be off, I would sense people being around me." Flicking on the light switch, she would see nothing, and blame her imagination for frightening her.

In high school, she began experimenting with Ouija boards. During science class, she would sit in the back of the room and use the Ouija board to conduct her own experiments. She laughingly recalled how when she went to her high school class's twentieth reunion, people told her that she had scared them back then.

Even as a child, then, Jane thought deeply about spiritual things. She connected death with life. Her thoughts, like the invisible figures in her room at night, could be unsettling. One thing that bothered her intensely was a foreboding about her father's death. "If he would have a cold and cough," she says, "I would always remember — I'd pause and stop. It's like I always knew that I didn't have him for a long time." Her father survived Jane's childhood. But in the months before he died, when Jane was a young adult, she started noticing numbers which she felt were omens of his imminent death. In our interview, it was not entirely clear if it was a single number or several of them, but the point is that the number(s) kept coming up. As she puts it, there was "a repetition of numbers, and it was scaring me."

Her father died when Jane was twenty-four. That same year, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Months later, her grandmother died. In our interview, looking back on that year, Jane said that her father's death was actually "the greatest gift he could have given me," because it clarified and confirmed her belief that death could not be the end of existence. Just as dead trees keep standing and shells scatter across shorelines, so peo-

ple couldn't just *leave*. The idea of total loss wasn't just objectionable. It was impossible.

Around half a year after Jane's father died, her mother travelled overseas. During the trip, she picked up a copy of the book *A Host of Voices* by the British medium Doris Stokes. Stokes had become a celebrity medium late in life, traveling around Britain and to the USA and Australia. She performed at the Sydney Opera House, appeared on a popular Australian television show hosted by Don Lane, and wrote several volumes of memoirs before she died at age 67 in 1987. Jane's mother had not really wanted to pick up a 400-page book to lug back to Australia, but, Jane remembers her mother saying, "'This book just was screaming at us.… I just think you need to read this.'"

So Jane took it and read it.

A Host of Voices is two books in one, the memoirs *Innocent Voices in My Ear* from 1983, and *Whispering Voices* from 1985. As a girl, Stokes writes, she had wanted to be a nurse, but could not meet the educational requirements. So as a young woman, she trained to be a maid. By the end of her life, she had become such a successful medium that she went from being the servant to being the served. In America, she was invited to "magnificent houses with servants to wait on us," and she was driven around England in a luxury Daimler (with its own TV and cocktail cabinet), insisting she needed such a roomy car because her ill health made traveling by other means too draining (Stokes (2000, 1:97, 2:53).Her infant son had died and Stokes was never able to have children afterward. As a medium, her specialty was bringing through the spirits of children to comfort their grieving parents.

Stokes's writing is charmingly eccentric, moving quickly from story to story in a way that lines up incongruous scenes as if they were all plain and equal when they are nothing of the sort. The spirit of John Lennon offers his opinion on Elton John. (It's positive [2000, 1:67].) Stokes's father goes to jail for poaching Lord Brownlow's rabbits (2:154). She solves the case of whose ghost is haunting a pizzeria. (It turns out to be two ghosts [1:148–59].) She despairs at being unable to answer the

"pram loads of mail" she gets daily (2:54). She includes descriptions of many memorable readings at her demonstrations, and includes appreciative poems and letters from her fans. Stokes has an earnest, comic touch throughout. For example, she writes that although she specializes in connecting parents with their late children, "this kind of work is the most emotionally draining… and so, just occasionally, it's nice to get my teeth into a good old impersonal ghost" (1:152).

I enjoyed reading Stokes and could see why Jane did, too. Like Jane, Doris Stokes knew she had an extrasensory gift when she was a child. And she resolutely affirms what Jane most needed to hear after her father's passing: that death is a promotion to new life. When Jane finished reading *A Host of Voices,* she recalls, "I was a Spiritualist. I read that book and went, *Oh my God, every single word in here.…* Every single word in that book resonated with me, and it felt so right in every cell of my body." A person opens a book and finds the ultimate truth: this is a familiar story, told in many traditions. For Jane, the experience supercharged her. "So I literally closed that book and said to Mum, 'I'm actually becoming a Spiritualist. This is my religion now,'" she recalled. "For Mum, it was a bit, like, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down.' And I'm like, 'I can't. This is who I am now. I now actually know who I am.'"

Jane tried to learn more about Spiritualism. Like Sarah, she found the resources in Canberra limited. And like many young Australian adults, she wanted to explore the rest of the world. So, around three years after her father's death, while still developing her spiritual sensibility, she decided to "go walkabout." She went wandering from Sri Lanka to Canada to Europe. In Sri Lanka, she met an Englishman named Nick, her future husband, although at the time she did not know they would end up together. She then went to Canada because she had a feeling she would find her soulmate there. After spending time at her sister-in-law's home in Canada, Jane crossed the ocean again and went to England, where she reconnected with Nick.

For several years, Jane stayed in England with Nick and his family. As she learned more about his background, she drew

connections between his past and their future. His grandparents and great aunts had been Spiritualist mediums. One of his cousins was a Wiccan. Another cousin did automatic writing, in which spirits guide the author's hand. The cozy spiritual environment of her new extended family inspired Jane.

When her husband's grandmother passed away, Jane was given a brochure the woman had kept from a long-ago service in Gordon Higginson's church. Higginson was one of the most famous and influential British mediums of the twentieth century, and served for years as president of the Spiritualists' National Union and principal of Arthur Findlay College. When Jane opened the brochure, she was excited to see that the medium who had given the demonstration that day had been Higginson's own mother. "Gordon's mother started training him when he was four," Jane said. "Gordon is like God and his mother is like Goddess" for Jane and her family. Now she came to feel that she "was absolutely destined to do this work" of mediumship. "It was in my destiny, every cell of my body." Everything fit together: Her father's death. Doris Stokes's book. Travel and marriage. Everything meshed and moved at the same time, held together by a peculiar gravity.

But there was a gap — a seven-year hitch after she moved back to Canberra with her husband. When she had been living with him in England, she attended Spiritualist services as often as possible. "I was a bit of a junkie," she quips. "I went to things four nights a week." But back in Canberra, she was disappointed and troubled by various things. For one, she realized that most mediums were working psychically rather than mediumistically. In other words, they were communicating telepathically with living respondents' minds rather than contacting people in the spirit world. For a committed Spiritualist, relying on psychic communication rather than working as a medium is like paying attention to a buzzing bee rather than the flowers attracting it. She was also frustrated when Spiritualists told her she couldn't refer to their groups as "churches," an objection Jane found ridiculous. Finally, she was terrified of public speaking, but people pushed her to give public demonstrations of her

mediumship, and, she remembers, "it was just too soon for me." From 2002 to 2009 she did not participate in Spiritualist activities, but studied Tibetan Buddhist astrology, feng shui, massage, and related practices.

Friends encouraged her to reconnect with Spiritualism in 2009, and she eventually "started to come back into the scene then." She trained at workshops in the UK and Canada. The influential British medium Tony Stockwell began holding intensive annual retreats in the Dandenong Ranges outside Melbourne, and Jane began attending those. She also took an online course Stockwell offered. The names of many of the mediums Jane learned from during her years of training are part of Sarah's story, too: they were both influenced by Christine Morgan in Australia, Mavis Pittilla and Chris Drew in the UK, and Brian Robertson and Simon James in Canada, among others. Jane admitted that some people had told her they felt her training was too eclectic. As she summarized the criticism she had heard: "'You've gone to too many [mediums], and because you've gone to too many, now you've got yourself confused because each one has a different slant on things.'" But she knew what she was doing, she insisted. Seeing as many good mediums as possible had given her a fuller sense of Spiritualism's possibilities and sharpened her own sense of what worked for her.

I asked Jane how she gets ready to do her work. On the morning of a private reading or public demonstration, she said, she asks people in the spirit world to prepare the space where she will be. "As I start to put my makeup on or whatever," she said, "I will just be having a conversation with my [spirit] team. 'This is what I want to do today. Take me to my client's greatest need.'" Around half an hour before beginning to work, she will "open up" (the term she prefers to "attuning"), meaning she focuses on making contact with the spirit world and getting ready for communication. She also listens to music to set particular moods. For years she has listened to "Wukun" by Gurrumul, an Aboriginal musician. She described the song as having a "ghostlike" feeling which "teaches me to go into the sacredness." More recently, she has added "Where I Sit Is Holy" by Shaina Noll,

and "Born to Be Wild" by Steppenwolf for an extra kick. She mentioned that it can be difficult to generate spiritual energy at CSA services because the seats are spread widely across the floor, rather than focused in a deep and narrow configuration which would help the flow. To counteract this, she has listened to music from the *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* soundtrack in order to get herself "into a more sassy kind of state and… pushing my energy out."

Like all good mediums, Jane insists on the value of evidence. But the way she receives it can be mysterious even to her: "I have no idea what's going to come out of my mouth, and [people in the spirit world] just literally ping me on the head and go, 'Spit it out,' and it just comes out." To keep the spiritual energy flowing, Jane keeps herself in motion. "You need to be able to move," she explained. "You need to be able to touch. You need to let your body flow." Moving helps her make an almost physical connection with the spirit world.

> I've had to teach myself to use my hands, and express myself and move, because that helps my clairsentience. So, I was born into a family that — we're not really big huggers [she laughs]. Took my father to pass [away]… for us to learn to hug. My husband taught me how to hug. Being in a very male family, that's not good for clairsentience….
>
> To receive clairsentience… you'll start to get a feeling in [your solar plexus]. And if you just let your body move and relax, it's not that Spirit are in you, but it's that Spirit have come so close that you can feel how they would move. Yeah? For example, if somebody was a weightlifter, and they lifted barbells like this, I might feel [it] in my muscles. I might be… drawn to my bicep muscles, and I'll just kind of feel something. Then I'll be aware that my hands are starting to go like this, and I'm starting to hold something….
>
> I could be drawn to a part of my body. Like if someone is having a heart attack, I'll feel pressure on my chest. And when you're developing [as a medium], that's quite a frightening feeling. Because it's like — *whoa, is this me? Am I hav-*

> *ing a heart attack? Or am I — what's going on?* And then you just ask [people in the spirit world] to take [the feeling] away, and they take it away as quick as that….
>
> You just start feeling it. I will know if somebody's had a brain aneurysm, for example. I'll start to feel it in my head. My head will start to feel a pressure. And it's only really when… you develop, you start to know what each passing feels like. You start to realize what a passing feels like.
>
> So, I will know when there is medication on board. So if somebody has had opioids because they are in the end of cancer, I will feel that. Because I'll just start to feel myself being kind of groggy. And I can just feel being dizzy. And quite often I'll be like this, and I'll know I'm going in and out of consciousness. And that's quite an easy one to pick up.
>
> There are some that are difficult. Things like transfusions, blood transfusions…. It's a very different feeling because you'll feel your blood vessels. You'll feel… a rush in your arm…. It's very clear when somebody's taken their life with a — if they've hung themselves, you'll feel very much — you can feel that. Having said that, a lot of people don't like to show you that, when they've taken their own life. But yeah, you can physically feel these things.

Although it might sound funny to say, Jane has a lively sense of death. As a physical process, death is not abstract for her. It is the clench of muscle, the wooziness of medication. It is blood rushing through her body, pressure in her heart and head, even the sickening feeling of being hanged.

Jane explained that sacredness — spiritual presence — has a vibe, like a warm bear hug that comes "around and up and over me." But some people feel this presence "like a band around their head." Then she turned the tables on her interviewer and asked me a question: had I ever felt spiritual presence like this? I replied that when I first began attending CSA meetings, I would get an uncomfortable, slightly painful feeling in my head at times. And recently, when an expert Spiritualist healer laid his hand on me, I felt a sensation in my head again. Jane replied

encouragingly, "That's right. So, for me also, healing [can be] unpleasant. When people have healing, a lot of time they feel it's good, but quite often I feel, when I have a healing, I feel it as being painful as well."

In a lighter vein, Jane communicates with animal spirits, although she acknowledges that conservative Spiritualists do not approve of this. During one cheerful reading at a CSA service, she "brought through" an audience member's cat, explaining how the cat was grateful for the care he received in his last days and acknowledged the memorial to him in the garden. In our interview, Jane recalled a time she gave a reading in a mediumship training class and "felt that my spine went very long, and I was aware that I had a tail." She laughed as she remembered the moment. She had been paired with another woman for one-on-one practice. "I was like, *Oh I have really big, beautiful ears,* and I was conscious that I became the animal. And I was conscious that I was, like, 'These ears are really, really beautiful. I am *the business* because of these ears' [she laughs], right? 'And have you seen my tail? This tail is fabulous!' And then I had to look at myself and say, 'Well, what am I?… Oh my gosh, I'm a *rodent!* I'm a mouse!'" She said that animals use "very simple language." The mouse she brought through "just thought it was ants' pants because it had great ears and a great tail." Her exercise partner explained that the mouse had been her sister's pet. When the sister had moved to a new home, she had opened the cage to let the mouse free.

Jane sometimes used her skills outside of services, private readings, and classes. Two of her most entertaining stories are about sensing Spirit at her humdrum office job as a civil servant. One time, she was working in the late afternoon when she smelled gas. She asked the two coworkers near her, a man and a woman, if they smelled anything. They said no. Jane insisted that she could smell gas, and began to get worried. Her coworkers were unfazed. The woman, who volunteered with the bushfire-fighting brigade and was not one to take gas leaks lightly, replied firmly that she could not smell anything. Jane went to the restroom, far away from her desk, and still smelled gas. She

asked people in that part of the office if they smelled anything, and they also said no. She returned to her desk and tried to work, but still smelled gas, when she suddenly realized that the scent must be coming from the spirit world. Her two coworkers knew that Jane worked as a spirit medium, so she felt she could ask them what would otherwise be a remarkably awkward question for office chat: had either of them known anyone who had taken their own life by inhaling gas? And the man said yes, his uncle had done so. Jane explained in our interview that the man had been going through a difficult time, and his deceased family members were coming by to give him support. The uncle pestered Jane until she figured out why she was sensing something no one else did.

Another time, she helped a coworker figure out why he kept smelling fish and chips. Jane told this story when she was the medium for a CSA service in May 2017.

> A colleague of mine was being taunted by the smell of fish and chips and vinegar, first thing in the morning. And he would be saying to me, "Oh, God, who's eating fish and chips this time of the day?" And I thought, *Oh, that's a bit strange.*
>
> After about the third day he said it… I went, *Ah, I know what's happening. He's lost his mother.* He's lost his mother recently. So I just very politely went up to him and… said, "I can't smell fish and chips and vinegar. But I believe you. I believe you, and I believe your mother loved fish and chips with vinegar." Whoa. [Jane laughs.] Whoa! He was like, "Yeah, she did, she really did. It was our Friday night thing. Every single Friday night for my entire childhood…. It was like a religious night for us." So, soon as he breathed that in, and believed that, and felt that, she didn't need to give it to him again. But he has it for the rest of his life. So if he smells fish and chips and vinegar first thing in the morning, it's gonna be his mum. She's gonna be the one that is there with him, giving him peace of mind.

Fish and chips, gas, and (on other occasions) perfume and cigarettes: for a medium like Jane, scents can reveal spirits' presence as powerfully as any other sign. The wrinkle in this last story is that Jane didn't smell the fish and chips herself, but had enough experience with these things to let her workmate know what was going on. His mother was lovingly reminding him of Friday night dinners.

By taking her mediumship into her daily workplace, a civil service office — perhaps the least enchanted space one can imagine — Jane showed the kind of confidence in Spiritualist truth that Sarah called for. Spiritual signs are everywhere, and they are invitations to conversation which should be taken up. Jane did acknowledge, however, that she needs to switch her spiritual attunement "on and off, because I am living in the real world," by which she meant the physical world we all agree on, more or less. She could tell her coworkers what she knew as long as they knew she was a medium and weren't bothered by it.

Jane, like Sarah, is proud of Spiritualism's history and the fact that women did so much to establish it, develop it, and help it survive in the face of doubt and ridicule. Even so, Jane distinguishes herself from "hardcore" members who are not supposed to believe in reincarnation or speak with animal spirits. For Jane, one of Spiritualism's strengths is how non-hardcore it is. "Our doors are open for everyone," she emphasized when she spoke at a CSA service in March 2018. "In this church, our door is open to every religion." But another one of its strengths is its overarching truth. In that same speech, Jane asked drily, "How many of you have done Buddhist things? Gone to Buddhist meditations, Buddhist things? Yeah. Okay. Me too. But you don't wanna become a Buddhist." She had tried Buddhism herself, as well as other paths — and as I type these words, she is expanding her interests in a new form of hypnotherapy called Rapid Transformational Therapy (RTT). Indeed, she quit her day job to become an RTT trainer, and enthused to me in an email that she now has a huge amount of energy as a result — funny words to read, because she hardly lacked for energy before.

In many ways, Jane fits the classic figure of the medium: a charismatic, even glamorous woman, one who combines deep social intelligence with an otherworldly sensibility, and who admits that her work is difficult and painful but rarely doubts or pauses in doing it.

* * *

Norman and Lynette Ivory were the first people I met at the Canberra Spiritualist Association. Norman always waited outside the community hall in Pearce before the CSA's Sunday services, greeting old friends and newcomers alike in his warm British baritone. Lynette always waited for students at the entrance to the senior center where she and Norman taught the CSA's courses. I interviewed them in January 2019 as a capstone to the research project, a way of rounding things off and putting a cheerful exclamation mark on a vibrant dialogue.

Like many long-married couples, they have a comic flair for teasing each other and personalities that have developed in consonance. Norman is the philosopher, happy in any conversation to begin thinking aloud about the way the universe is put together from atoms to angels. Lynette is firmly grounded, attentive to the details of daily life and unafraid to correct Norman when he makes a mistake — or, during services or classes, to urge him to begin wrapping up a long speech. During my research at the CSA, Norman was the president and Lynette was the treasurer and usually selected the music for services.

Norman has been spiritually attuned his whole life. He was raised in a devout Baptist family in Leverstock Green, a village in Hertfordshire. It is now part of London's sprawl, but was still a small country place when he grew up there in the 1940s and 1950s. To all appearances, Norman was a good Christian kid. He sat with his grandfather in the chapel pew while his mother played the organ. He once got the top mark in a Hertfordshire-wide Sunday-school bible exam. When he was around thirteen, he attended a Billy Graham crusade in Manchester. He now recalls the warmth and energy of those times. But by his early

teens, he had rejected the claims of Christianity. The fractured logic of the Bible seemed ridiculous to him. Moreover, he had developed a remarkable confidence in his own abilities — a sense that he could "solve many puzzles just by thinking about them long enough."[1]

Norman had unusual experiences as a boy. Some were mild, like intuitively knowing where missing balls had gone during games. But some were powerful: He routinely felt invisible people sitting on his bed during the night, and saw large eyes hovering there, watching him. When he was around ten, he had his first experience of a spirit speaking through him. His Sunday-school teacher was "droning on about some New Testament story about Jesus," and Norman's attention drifted away. All at once he found himself speaking up, exclaiming, "Oh, bollocks!" And in that moment, he was mortified. He wasn't rude by nature, and the words had just popped out of his mouth. The teacher did not seem angry, however. He simply commented that this was not a nice thing to say, and went on with the lesson. Looking back, Norman writes, "It was so unlike me, and I could not understand why I had said it. I never forgot this. It was not until approximately forty years later that I realised there must have been someone in spirit within me." Whoever this spirit person was, they objected to the teacher's lesson and said so through Norman.

Disenchanted with Christianity, Norman continued to meditate on the nature of reality. In the autumn of 1968, he attended his first Spiritualist service. By that time he was twenty-eight years old and had been married to his first wife for six years. Strange things began to happen at their rented house in Bovingdon. For example, once when his wife was preparing to light the coal fire, she saw and felt her deceased mother's hands helping her. Norman telephoned the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain, who advised him to attend a service at a Spiritualist church. He and his wife went to one nearby, in Chesham. They

1 The biographical details in this paragraph and the next four come from Ivory (2016b, 1–9).

left their young son and daughter with Norman's father-in-law, taking care to tell him they were going to church but not specifying which kind of church.

The medium that day was a young woman, around twenty-five years old. During her demonstration, she came to Norman first. She began by saying she had a message from Percy, his late grandfather. Like Sarah's first meeting with Christine and Jane's reading *A Host of Voices,* Norman was astonished and convinced by his exposure to Spiritualist mediumship. There was no way the medium could have known his grandfather's name, and Percy was too unusual a choice to guess randomly. She then offered information about Percy's life, and passed advice from grandfather to grandson. She said Percy told Norman to keep his "head down at work the same as he did in the war, when he wore his 'tin hat.'" Although Norman thought this detail must be mistaken because his grandfather had not fought in the war, he asked his grandmother about it the following week and learned that Percy had indeed worn a tin hat while serving as an air-raid warden during the Blitz.

As Norman tells the story in his first book, this service "turned my thinking rather upside down." Although he had left Christianity long ago, he had not replaced it with anything new. Now he could. He knew for a fact that there was life after death, that mediums can communicate with the deceased, and that the world consists of much more than physical matter.

In 1969, he was invited by friends to meet the medium Albert Stone. The older man asked Norman to sit on a chair in his tiny living room, to be quiet, and to see what happened. Laughing at the memory, Norman recalls sitting there, hearing a church bell ring, a dog bark, and cars drive by. "And nothing much else happened for about forty minutes," he remembers. Albert and Norman just sat and sat.

And then, as Norman explained when I interviewed him:

> Suddenly… with my mind's eye I saw a curtain, which was a heavy tapestry curtain, hanging right across the room. There was nothing there before, of course…. [Albert] was sitting on

another chair, with his wife, and he was saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "Well, I see a curtain across the room." So I felt, within me, I just felt urged to push my way through the curtain mentally. Not physically. Mentally. So I pushed my way through the curtain, which opened in the middle.

Through the curtain, and beyond the curtain there was a… king-size bed. And behind the bed, against the wall, was a large mirror. And I could see that there was something going on in the mirror, so it was as though it was almost a window. So, mentally I travelled across the bed… and walked across it, and climbed through the mirror at the back. And that led me through to a continuous experience of impressions which then flowed and continuously came to me, and I was able to describe all I was seeing to Albert Stone. And that must have lasted over an hour.

Anyway, when I felt that the time was correct, I returned back through the mirror, back through the curtain, and joined my body, sitting in the chair again, feeling very strange.

And I said to him, "Well, I think that's about all I'm seeing at the moment." He said, "Thank you very much. You've just giving us a reading for the next six months in our lives." So, I didn't understand how that could be, but that's what he said…. I went and saw him half a dozen times, and the meetings were similar to that on each occasion. And each time it appeared that he was more happy, inasmuch as I was getting more [information] and getting it more quickly. In other words, instead of waiting for three quarters of an hour to see something, [now] in ten minutes I was away and saying things.

So I then thought about, *Well, what am I going to do with this?* So I asked Albert. And he said, "Well, why don't you come along to the Spiritualist church" that he was the president of? And this was in a place in England called Hemel Hempstead. So we went to the church, which was at a place called Boxmoor…. I went there and, over the weeks, I joined the committee, and all this time I was feeling that my ability to do clairvoyance was increasing. And later I went to a home

> circle from people within that church, and that enabled me to develop there even further.

In some ways, Norman's vision was a classic shamanic voyage. He travelled into the spirit world to discover something and help someone back in the physical world. This is not quite how most mediums work during Spiritualist demonstrations, but the event was recognizably Spiritualist in its cultivation of an extraordinary vision within a plain space. In an old man's cramped quarters, with the noise of street life outside, Norman pushed through a curtain and went on an adventure through the looking glass.

Although mediums insist that anyone can practice mediumship, Norman has an acute ability to sense things other people do not, which goes back to his early days. Albert recognized a natural talent. In fact, Norman's world is the most thoroughly enchanted of anyone I have met. Spirit lives everywhere for him. In his first book, he describes, among other things, meeting a joyful procession of hundreds of fairies led by their king and queen; commanding Devas to bring rainfall; seeing the bird-headed Angel of Death at a friend's bedside; and banishing a dark, floppy, red-eyed spirit shaped like a gingerbread man during a house cleansing (loosely, the Spiritualist equivalent of an exorcism). "When I first started to debate with myself as to the existence of nature spirits and look for them," he writes drily, "I doubted my perception, as there seemed to be overwhelmingly too many everywhere" (Ivory 2016b, 181–222).

When you meet Norman in person, though, you simply meet a friendly, well dressed retiree, someone fully aware of physical limits and social norms. His working life reflects his practical, nothing-fancy personality. He began working at age sixteen and retired at seventy. In England, he spent years as a production controller at a paper-conversion company which made envelopes. In 1972, he got a chance to emigrate with his family to Australia, taking the same job at a factory owned by the same firm.

After arriving in Australia, he began attending a Spiritualist church in the Sydney suburb of Enmore. Then, after moving slightly west to Penrith, he began going to a church in St. Mary's, where he met Lynette. Norman developed his mediumship at various churches in the Sydney area, and settled into a congregation at Blacktown. He was asked to take leadership of that church, and agreed. When he took over, he recalls, the first service drew exactly four people. But Norman and Lynette were good church-builders, and within three years they were drawing as many as sixty people to services. They moved the meeting site, renamed the church The Hills Spiritualist Centre, and began holding two services each Sunday. They spent around two decades there before coming to Canberra and eventually leading the Canberra Spiritualist Association.

Lynette had grown up Catholic in Sydney. Like Norman, as well as Sarah and Jane, she found her early religious instruction illogical. Like many Catholics, she didn't like the church's flavor of authoritarianism marinated in guilt. Unlike most Catholics, she became attracted to Spiritualism.

Before meeting Norman, Lynette had also been married and had children. One day, she learned that her teenaged daughter had gotten a tarot reading. "I didn't think that that was appropriate," she said during our interview. "Because I'd heard a lot about it, but I knew nothing about it.… My sister was also having experiences with spirit activity, and I thought: Now I've got to go and find out about this. I need to know. Is there anything I can do? Is it dangerous?" She began attending the Spiritualist church in St. Mary's in November 1980 to learn more.

She was wary. When she began going to a mediumship development circle, she had "the attitude that if they start any silly nonsense, I'm out of there." But it didn't seem silly, and she was willing to explore — to find out the truth for herself, to escape the judgment which, she recalled, had led her to tell fibs during Catholic confession as a girl. Over time, she learned that tarot reading was not frightening, and could actually be helpful.

When Lynette took a class at St. Mary's, her teacher was a "strange Englishman," she jokes. She and Norman got married

in January 1983. As Norman practiced his mediumship by speaking with spirits, healing with spirit energy, and giving trance lectures, he also pushed Lynette to develop her own skills. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter 5, he could push quite hard, and she didn't always feel ready. But she now says she is glad she persisted, because mediumship has enriched her life and enabled her to help others. Whereas Norman tends to see spiritual presences, Lynette usually intuits them: "I get an impression in my mind about the person" in the spirit world, she says, "about what they're trying to get through. And I have to interpret according to my own emotions, my own intellect, my own knowledge."

She taught the CSA course on mediumship. Or, as she clarified at a CSA committee meeting in April 2017, she didn't teach the classes herself — Spirit did. But she was the one at the front of the room, delivering the lessons based on the week's plan in the coursebook she and Norman had coauthored. Norman chipped in with points he wanted to make. Sometimes they bantered playfully, Norman indicating he wanted to say something and Lynette teasing that this was no surprise. Sometimes they disagreed with each other, reinforcing the point that Spiritualism is meant to help people discover the truth individually rather than accept it by fiat.

Their back-and-forth conversation could develop a point, as when they discussed the Spiritualist principle of personal responsibility during a class in June 2017. Lynette noted that today there are public warnings everywhere about how you can get hurt. She was referring to signs posted to prevent lawsuits from people who don't realize, for example, that crumbling cliffs are dangerous. She said, "Well, I'm sorry, but we came down here to get hurt." She meant that physical experience entails suffering, and suffering is necessary for spiritual growth. Norman piped up with an example. Say you are sitting in your car at a red light, he suggested, and a reckless driver plows into you. Whose fault is it? Yours, partly, because "you agreed to be part of that accident at your higher [spiritual] level," knowing you needed this painful experience in order to grow in hard-won wisdom. But, he added, the more spiritually mature you become, the less

this kind of thing will happen. You will already have learned how responsibility works, existentially speaking, and your spiritual self will lead you to avoid that kind of car crash in the future. Lynette affirmed this, saying "it's not a conscious decision" that you will take a different route. Your spiritual self will eventually choose for you to do that. Norman then gave another example, referring to a real-life train wreck in which, he said, people who were supposed to die boarded the train even though they wouldn't normally have taken it, and people who were supposed to live didn't get on it that day even though they usually did. At this point in the discussion, both Norman and Lynette were using the term "higher self" to describe the part of you that determines your participation in events, including events that seem to damage you.[2]

Your true self, in Norman's and Lynette's understanding, is foundationally spiritual. "Don't ever forget," Lynette taught us in the twentieth and final session of the mediumship course, "You're not a physical person. You're Spirit with a body." A little over two months later, she repeated this point in a speech at a CSA service: "You are Spirit. First, foremost, and nothing else." Although we need to live physical lives in order to suffer, learn, and grow spiritually, our physical presence is fleeting. Our spiritual essence endures. This understanding has led both Norman and Lynette to emphasize that there is a universal spiritual reality, and that of all the world's philosophies, Spiritualism gives the sharpest and most finely balanced tools for tracing its shape and testing its connections.

Norman and Lynette, like many Spiritualists, see Spiritualism as the original human religion. "We say that modern Spiritualism began in 1848," Lynette explained at a CSA service in July 2017,

> And as I've pointed out a number of times, and others have pointed out to me, Spiritualism goes back to the time when

2 He tells this story in Ivory (2016b, 88), and discusses the example of responsibility for a car crash in Ivory (2020, 196–197).

> man first came to the earth world.... You've always had the witch doctors, you've also had the shamans. You've also had those people who were seers in their tribes or in their civilizations. There has always been communication with Spirit. It is not just a hundred and some odd years old.
>
> Everyone can communicate with Spirit. You just have to trust — have to trust yourself, and you have to trust Spirit. And trusting Spirit is a lot harder, because you can't see them. You can't see their face. You can't assess whether what they're telling you is true or not. So you have to rely on how you feel about what you're being told. You accept it or reject it.
>
> You're perfectly entitled to say to Spirit — or to somebody on this side — "Sorry, that's not part of my understanding." And Spirit accept that, because they realize not everybody is at the same level of understanding.... And if you're willing to open your mind, to take on information that you've never heard before and think about it, then you can reject it or not. But understanding — understanding what you think, understanding what you believe, understanding what other people are experiencing, understanding the differences between people — is what helps you to find peace and acceptance of people in this world.

For mediums like Sarah, Jane, Norman, and Lynette, the universe comes together in a coherent way. We cannot reject other people's experiences out of hand, but we cannot accept them uncritically, either. We have to explore for ourselves. If we explore in the right way, making connections with people in the spirit world, we will learn truths that are both personal and universal. On the way to understanding, we will be astonished. And this astonishment will reveal beauty everywhere, including, paradoxically, the beauty of limitations and uncertainty. This beauty can contain immense sadness, as mediums comfort and heal people devastated by loss. As Norman put it during our interview, an important tool for any medium is a box of tissues. But it is also the beauty that gives mediums joy and purpose in working towards living proof.

CHAPTER 8

Greetings! I'm Sorry for Your Loss

July 27, 2017 was the depths of winter in Canberra. The week's topic in our mediumship course was "Spiritualism's Mission." Before students were called upon to do our public-speaking practice, Norman's cell phone rang. He left the room, and apparently tried to return the call without success. When he came back, he was worried. The missed call was from a woman I will call Susan. Susan was a medium who lived in Sydney but came to Canberra now and then and was friends with Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA) members. Her husband had cancer. Norman was concerned that the call might be news that the man had died. One of the students, Debby Walker, whose story of coming to Spiritualism was told in Chapter 3, responded sympathetically to Norman's anxiety.

Spiritualism might seem to fit the image of religion Philip Larkin weaves in "Aubade": "That vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die." But death happens, at least physically, and Spiritualists are no happier than Catholics, Wiccans, or atheists when it does. This should not really be surprising, though, because Spiritualism grew from a desire for ongoing connection in the face of rude disconnection. From mid-nineteenth-century mediums bringing wisdom from Benjamin Franklin to Sarah Jeffery welcoming a troop of soldiers into her kitchen, mediums begin with the understanding

that most people, themselves included, would rather connect through the sense of a story than stand by helplessly as relations dissolve. In "Aubade," death is annihilation. In Spiritualism, it is a promotion. But that does not mean anyone is looking forward to it.[1]

There was a wrinkle here. Debby — the class member who was personally closest to Norman and Lynette, and who seemed like a possible successor to Norman as president of the CSA — was dying of cancer. She insisted that she was fine. She was healing, she said. Norman and Lynette had practiced spiritual healing on her, and she had gone through plenty of modern medical procedures as well. But when you looked at her, you could see she was deeply unwell. At times she was in severe pain. Chemotherapy had made her bald, and her voice was often hoarse. To add to her suffering, she was in the process of quitting a job that had made her miserable. Yet she didn't have an ounce of self-pity. No one was more resolutely optimistic than Debby. When I met her on her difficult days, I confess I had a hard time, intellectually and emotionally, understanding her optimism, and I cringed with guilt at my own discomfort — after all, she was the one going through all this.

In class that night, Debby spoke to us directly about her health, which she did not usually do. She said that she had been

1 Vinciane Despret, drawing in part on the work of anthropologist Alexa Hagerty, tries to separate mourning and loss when she argues that the dead insist on multiplicity (Despret 2021). In her description of a corpse that smiled at family members, Hagerty wrote that the smile was "both a muscular movement and a supernatural communication," a site at which "the body is both biological and sacred, object and subject, disenchanted and enchanted, inert and still offering its enspirited care" (Hagerty in Despret 2021, 81; emphases deleted). This framing depends on what Despret calls a "precious grammatical register of conjunctions: and, and, and" (81). Yet curiously, she goes on to assert that mourning "has nothing to do with rupture, but more with looking after and intensifying relations, processes in which [the] dead are actively implicated" (96). The kind of mourning that Spiritualist mediums enable, however, is another "and, and, and" relationship: physical death has everything to do with rupture, and mediums and mourners look after and intensify relations with the dead. The rupture and the relational care necessarily go together.

diagnosed with bowel cancer and had undergone surgery to remove 75 percent of her bowel. The cancer had spread to her lungs. Then it spread to her cervix. She was given two and a half years to live. That was a year and a half ago. But she had recently received the news that the cancer in her bowel and cervix was gone, and there was only a small spot left in her lungs. She was now focused on getting rid of this small spot through spiritual healing guided by Norman.

Vee, our fellow student, had the unenviable task of speaking next. But, in the way Spiritualists manage to do so well, she turned the theme of loss into something funny and, as a result, uplifting. Loss is our essential human condition, she said. She was not commenting on Debby's experiences, but reflecting on her own. She mentioned comparatively minor things — her son's trouble in school, her computer's hard drive crashing. Because we are always faced with loss, Vee said, we should get rid of the greetings we typically use when we meet people. Instead, our standard form of address should be: "Greetings! I'm sorry for your loss." She said it so cheerfully, it sounded like a good idea.

Debby's confidence in her ability to beat cancer contrasted with my father's apparent reluctance to think about his condition. But it reminded me strongly of another family member, my mother's older sister, who endured myelodysplastic syndrome for years, regularly receiving blood transfusions when she weakened. As she grew older, Aunt Carole had embraced conservative Episcopalianism. Late in 2008, my mother mentioned that Carole had had a strange vision, so when we met for Thanksgiving, I asked her about it. Carole explained that she had not seen a ghost, as I had thought, but the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost had told her she would be fine.

You mean you'll be healthy? I asked.

Yes, she replied. She leveled her gaze at me, committed to believing that her health was about to improve.

I felt a riot of emotions, impressed by her confidence but also skeptical and sad about my skepticism, numbly aware that she did not think my own spiritual state was in good condition.

* * *

Having quit her job in Canberra, Debby moved home to Christchurch to be closer to her family and, she hoped, to find a new and less stressful job. Her final time serving as a medium at a CSA service was on June 3, 2018. In her address that day, she spoke about faith — not a typical topic in Spiritualism, with its emphasis on evidence. But for Debby, faith was based in evidence, the proof she had received in her own life about the presence of Spirit.

Her doctor now thought the cancer had spread to her stomach. Debby said she didn't believe it. Still, she knew that before she returned to New Zealand, she needed one more round of major surgery, and it was scheduled for the following Friday. She told me before the service began that she had been seeing bright lights lately, which she took as a sign of spiritual presence. Spirit was coming to heal her, she said, and when the time came, would help the doctors during her surgery.

In an address to the CSA several months earlier, she had joked about how stubborn she was. She insisted that no matter what her oncologist said about the little time she had left to live, "there's no way I am going anywhere. No way whatsoever." She explained that she had not told many people about the challenges she faced, because talking about them could make them worse, giving negative energy rather than positive healing. As she put it: "I believe that...what we think about, what we focus on, we create. And we create what goes on in our lives. So the less people I told what was occurring to me, the less people were focusing on me and on that condition. So it was a way to release, and move through the process without all that [negative] energy." And, in a surprisingly beautiful ceremonial moment, she told us that in her condition she had learned, of all things, to love her body: "I, all of a sudden, realized about a week or so ago — I think I was talking to Lynette — and I said, 'For the first time in my life, I actually love my body.' I acknowledged what an amazing thing my body is. It's been through this experience, and I'm still standing here."

Debby died at age 58 in February 2020, joining Susan's husband and also Aunt Carole, who had died at age 67, two and a half months after her reassurance from the Holy Ghost. Debby and Carole did not share their beliefs, but they shared a determined hope. I admit I was both inspired and unsettled by their hope. Death may not be annihilation, but it is also, as Larkin puts it, "unresting." Maybe I am overlooking the liveliest part of the story, however, which is that of everything else Debby had been in her life — a warrant officer in the New Zealand Air Force, a mad fan of the All Blacks rugby team, an entertaining speaker whose cheerful stories were enhanced by her thick Kiwi accent that turned "prayer" into "priya" — she was first and foremost a committed Spiritualist. She knew how alive she was, and would be.

Here were her closing words in her final address to the Canberra Spiritualist Association, before she went home:

> So, what I think my message here is about is: just take a step away from the brain, the mind, what we've been taught. And maybe just step into — even a little bit, 'cause it can be scary — that place of just having a wee bit of faith, and doing it differently. Maybe just stepping back and seeing what the universe will bring you. Because if you let them, they will bring you everything. They will allow you to feel your compassion, your passion, your joy, your wonderfulness. Not the misery that comes with fear and always thinking with this. Thank you.

* * *

In beginning the research project, I expected mediums to offer intellectual light, but I was aware there might also be emotional darkness. How can a focus on death not be shaded by anxiety and regret? Yet as I have tried to show in this book, mediums' demonstrations at Spiritualist services consistently emphasize the positive: love, hope, connection. Although mediums sometimes receive disturbing sensations, and members of the public

sometimes ask mediums to cleanse their houses of frightening spirits, the dominant tone in mediumship is reliably positive. The universal energy is love. Life goes on forever. We are all making continual spiritual progress.

I did discover a significant source of anxiety, however: the possible death of the church itself. As the congregation grew older and smaller, and financial support dwindled, members wondered if the CSA would exist in any meaningful form in the future.

As a member of the committee running the CSA from 2016 to 2019, I could see that in some ways, the church was robust. There was enough money in the bank account for the church to operate for many years with its minimal requirements of room rental and small operational costs. The budget was handled scrupulously, every bit of income and expense accounted for precisely and reported on regularly. Although the services were not drawing many people, a brief experiment with expanding the CSA's social media presence had boosted attendance noticeably. And, crucially, Canberra has plenty of talented mediums.

But the older members of the CSA were troubled by the fact that the Association was failing to thrive. Not enough new people were coming. When they did, they didn't stay. Those who came and stayed tended to be older, and they didn't always have the energy to run things smoothly, let alone help the congregation grow. When both Norman and Lynette became sick around Easter in 2017, they had to cancel one of the mediumship classes, and for Lynette, this was a worrying sign — not for their personal health, but for the CSA's institutional health. At the next committee meeting, she complained that in a thriving organization, a substitute teacher would have been available to step in for them that night.

The community center in Pearce was a perfectly adequate meeting site in most ways, but it also stoked CSA members' anxieties about impermanence. The room we met in was definitely big enough. The rent was not steep. Services were rarely disturbed by other groups, which had been a problem in another meeting site. But the lack of ownership bothered senior mem-

bers of the congregation. A truly stable group should not worry whether enough younger folks will show up in time to help set things up before the service: the chairs, the projector and speakers, the coffee urn, the table with literature and the book of names for spiritual healing. A permanent home would mean everything was in its right place.

For a time in 2016 and 2017, the committee discussed various options for moving to a better location. Would another church share its space? Unlikely, and anyway, sharing space was not the real plan. What about the government, which made some properties available for religious organizations? The inquiries about this didn't go anywhere, although they were enlivened by the fact that the relevant minister was named Mr. Gentleman. During my first year on the committee, I got the sense that finding a new, permanent building was of tremendous emotional importance for some members. Indeed, two members of the committee reported that they had received messages from the spirit world about the need to find a home for the CSA. But the bank balance, healthy as it was for the purposes of renting space in a community center, was not nearly enough to buy a building in Canberra.

In his president's message in the first CSA newsletter of 2017, Norman wrote hopefully about the committee's efforts. Having a permanent home for the Association, he wrote, would "provide us with premises where we can build up our own spiritual vibration and so increase the spiritual frequencies within the place to be a greater support for all mediums, psychics and people who are developing and looking for spiritual progress." The group could meet every Sunday rather than every other Sunday. For that matter, members could meet whenever they wanted. For example, groups of young mothers could meet midday (Ivory 2017, 3).

Lynette sent an email asking people which of several locations they would prefer to meet in. However, in a reflection of the underlying problem, not many responses came back. Then, following the second-to-last service in 2017, around twenty people participated in an open consultation about how to attract more

members. The meeting was run by Lynette's son. Although he was not a member of the CSA, he was sympathetic and had experience running these kinds of discussions. Suggestions ranged widely, from printing bumper stickers to being more involved in the local community, and from promoting the church on Facebook to visiting people in the hospital. By that time, the urgency of finding a new home seemed to have waned somewhat, and no one at the meeting mentioned buying a new building. In the first service of 2018, Norman did speak about the numerological significance of the years 2017 through 2020, saying that 2020, whose digits add up to four, would be the year for the CSA to get a new home because four signifies the physical.

The challenge of institutional survival is hardly limited to Spiritualism. It confronts many religious groups whose elderly members watch in dismay as young people leave and churches close down. The difference for Spiritualism is that its central practice — mediumship — is likely to survive. As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, the desire to interact with extrahuman forces is found in so many societies that, whatever form it takes, mediumship will be practiced long into the future. The kinds of mediumship that are practiced a hundred years from now might look entirely different from what goes on in the Pearce community center. But the purpose of mediumship will remain the same. Mediumship delivers social recognition in a spiritual tongue, affirming that you and your loved ones matter and your relationships with them will always continue to matter.

The popularity of mediumship does not comfort Norman. He still sees the need for a church: a place anchored in a community where people can learn together and build up spiritual energy over a long period of time. He worries that when mediums work for profit, giving demonstrations at psychic fairs and social clubs, their desire to entertain weakens the good work they are doing underneath it all. They might be delivering skilled demonstrations of mediumship, but if they are surrounded by boozy listeners and slot machines, the effect will be more diluted than the club's happy hour specials. Mediumship becomes a gimmick or a sideshow.

In our interview, however, Norman added that even mediums performing in clubs are still led by their spirit guides. This led him to conclude, with equal parts optimism and fatalism, "people in Spirit must know what they're doing."

* * *

Seen analytically, the kind of mediumship I have described in this book combines Protestant individualism with the science-inspired thrill of discovery and the starburst wonder of New Age mysticism. But to reduce it to those influences would be to miss the point that mediumship morphs and crosses cultures. It takes on new styles in new places and times. Spiritualist mediumship excited me when I saw and tried it in Canberra because it made extraordinary claims in the plainest of settings. Here were people saying they would prove the existence of life after death. As they spoke, they were not draped in ritual finery or standing majestically in a cathedral, but fumbling with looseleaf notebook pages on a music stand in front of a balky microphone in a rented hall. Like Australia itself, Australian Spiritualism combines a sense of lofty possibility with an insistence on earthy and earthly humility.

When I tried practicing mediumship myself, as I have described, the results were bumpy. I took the effort seriously. I did what I had been taught to do. I was surprised and happy when the impressions I received made sense and brought comfort to somebody missing a loved one. But I also had awkward moments and more than a measure of self-doubt. Whatever else it is, mediumship is intense work. The fact that it is understood to be a search for evidence that might be discovered anywhere does not make it any easier.

The sensation and description of humdrum details — your grandfather lived into his seventies, smoked a pack of cigarettes a day, and always regretted dropping out of school — are linked to the highest of existential claims. If what I just said is right, then you know life goes on forever. The combination of ordinary detail and extraordinary vision is vital to all forms of spirit medi-

umship. This combination was expressed humorously by Lynn Probert, the British medium whose visit to Canberra wound up shaping the course of my research project and the writing of this book in many ways. In her training workshop, she mentioned the difference between mental mediumship, which has been the subject of this book, and physical mediumship. Mental mediumship, she said, was what a normal medium would do.

"Or as normal as you can be," she corrected herself. "You're talking to dead people."

Mediumship is not normal work, but mediums insist that their work is rational and their claims provable. In addressing death, they do not deny loss, but look for a newly vital world in which loss is only part of the story of life. Gesturing both inward and outward to connect people across existential planes, mediums speak to people to recognize their character, their value, their shared history, and future memory. Not only is the work never normal, it is not entirely predictable, either. Mediumship is music, words that have shaped the air around them for thousands of years. It will keep being heard by audiences that listen, leaning forward, as the talk goes on and speakers and listeners work to recognize that person, to recognize you. Yes, that's them, that's us.

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